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SIX MYSTICS OF INDIA

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GANESH & CO.
Madras
1996

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GANESH & CO.
23 Thanikachalam Road, Madras 600 017

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ISBN: 81-85988-06-4

Price: Rs.135/-

First published: 1996

Cover design: Chinnoo

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Produced by Madras Editorial Services, Madras 600 017,
typeset by PACE Systems, Madras 600 032, and
printed in India at Sudarshan Graphics, Madras 600 017.
Published by Ganesh & Co., 23 Thanikachalam Road,
Madras 600 017.

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SIX MYSTICS OF INDIA

In this book are the stories of six extraordinary persons — Raghavendra Swami of Mantralaya, Saibaba of Shirdi, Seshadri Swami of Thiruvannamalai, Bala Yogi of Mummidivaram, Jillellamudi Amma and Poondi Swamiyar. The first was a yogi who attained *Jeeva Samadhi*, the second a rare mystic, the third a *Brahma Jnani,* the fourth was engaged in permanent *tapasya,* the fifth embodied universal love as *tapas* and the sixth was an enigmatic *Siddha.*

Bharanidharan narrates their life stories, describes their ashrams, and talks of the miracles they performed, providing a wealth of hitherto unknown detail. What he tells is extraordinarily absorbing and profoundly moving, as he brings out the great compassion of these mystics.

Six Mystics of India is a travelogue of the spirit. It is also a travelogue which takes you on a vicarious pilgrimage to the places sanctified by these six mystics; in a sense, to the holy India which remains still hidden to most of us.

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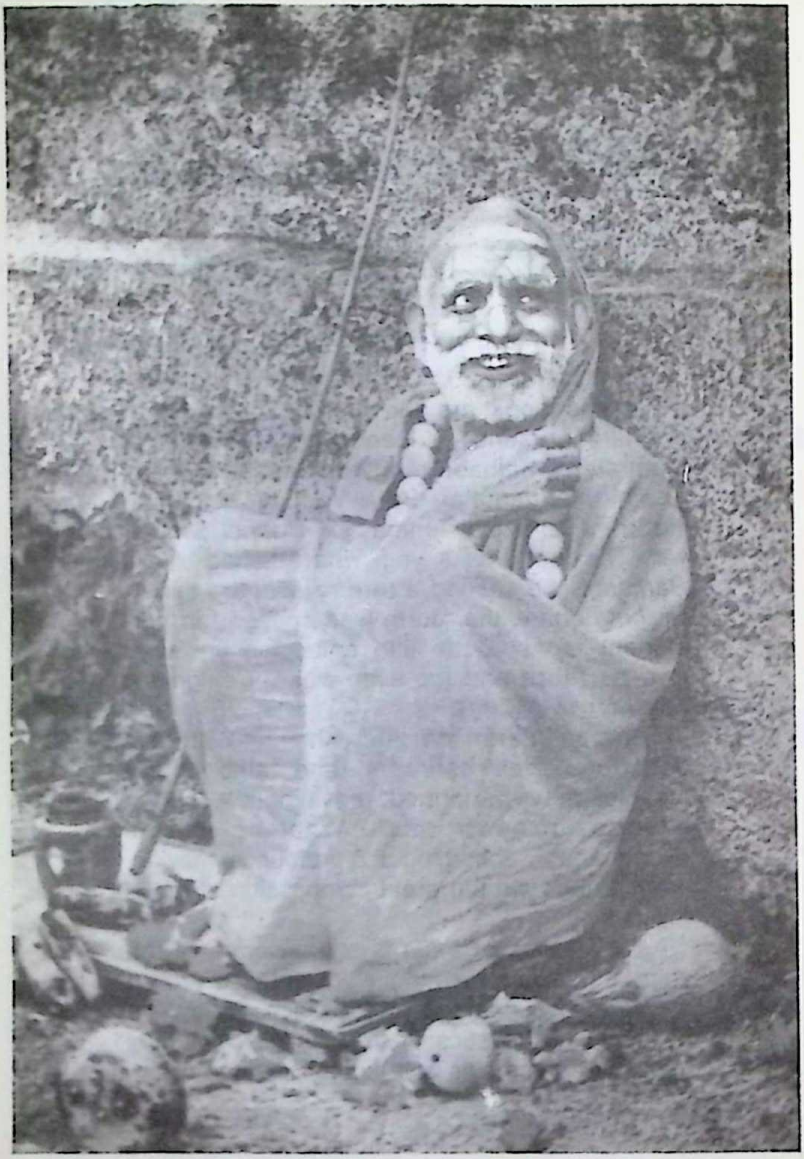

THE SAGE OF KANCHI

Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Swami

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Preface

My acquaintance with the English language can be traced back to my schooldays. While at college, I developed a fascination and admiration for it, listening to my professors. I frequented the library to enjoy the engaging and ennobling company of authors of repute. Very often, I took them home as my honoured guests and they became my best friends and most reliable guides, nurturing in me a taste for this beautiful, rich and expressive language. When I left the portals of the college, I had fallen irreversibly in love with English! But I chose to express myself in Tamil for over four decades, while always dreaming of the day I'd write in English.

An obsessional urge to express myself in English took hold of me in 1975 and I even started mentally planning a book! But I resisted the temptation as I was convinced that my knowledge of the language was insufficient to cope with my ambition. Then, one day, responding to my inner prompting, I sought the blessings of the Sage of Kanchi, fully confident of the unfailing efficacy of his unbounded grace. Since 1957, when I had my first *darshan* of this rare embodiment of our ancient wisdom and spiritual eminence, he has been the light that showed me the way in all my endeavours. It was no different this time.

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His soothing smile and approving nod were the green signal I needed and I started writing the same night. The manuscript was ready in six months. I gave it to a few friends who went through it with great commitment, made necessary corrections and improved on it.

Subsequently, I contacted a few publishers. One after another, they made encouraging promises, but put the project in cold storage for reasons best known to them! Every time, it was only after strenuous effort and laborious persuasion that I was able to retrieve my script and, finally, I deposited it safely in the loft!

After several years of hibernation in that dark cave aloft, I noted the glimmer of a ray of hope when I met Sri K Srinivasamurthy of Ganesh & Co last year. He enthusiastically agreed to publish the book and has kept his word. The result is *Six Mystics of India* that is now in your hands.

My thanks are also due in no small measure to Sri S Muthiah for going through the script with rare patience and committed sincerity, editing, pruning, polishing and embellishing it. I am beholden to him for his invaluable suggestions and help in getting the book ready for the press.

I place my first book in English at the sacred feet of the Sage of Kanchi, the fountainhead of my inspiration, and invoke his benign blessings for my future efforts.

26-7-'96 BHARANIDHARAN

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The author

T.S. Sridhar, who writes under the widely known pseudonym 'Bharanidharan', was born on December 25, 1925, in a cultured South Indian Brahmin family, the third son of the late T.N. Seshachalam, a lawyer-turned-literary critic, a scholar in English and Tamil, a prolific writer and editor of the Tamil literary weekly *Kalanilayam* published during the period 1928-1935.

Though a graduate in Commerce from the Madras University, Sridhar did not evince any interest in meddling with numbers. He had developed a flair for caricaturing and cartooning from early school-days and, while in college, started contributing illustrated jokes and political cartoons to various magazines. This paved the way for a journalistic career soon after graduation in the late Forties. After an initial spell of freelancing as a cartoonist with the *Ananda Vikatan*, the premier and popular Tamil weekly, he joined its editorial staff in 1956 and retired as its Joint Editor in 1985.

While working mainly as a political cartoonist with *Ananda Vikatan*, he took to writing leading political articles under the able and inspiring leadership of its Proprietor-Editor, the late S.S. Vasan. Soon, he assumed the pseudonym of 'Marina' and began penning short humor-

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ous sketches which were well received by readers. In 1964, he made his maiden attempt at writing a serial in the magazine, a biographical sketch of Kasturba Gandhi, wife of Mahatma Gandhi. It was titled *Kasturi Thilakam* and was published under another *nom de plume*, 'Bharanidharan'. The serial was an unprecedented success and acclaimed by readers for its lucid, original, narrative style of presentation.

His next serial was on a visit to Srisailam, the Saivite pilgrim centre in Andhra Pradesh. The occasion was the consecration of the newly-built *mantap* dedicated to Sri Adi Sankaracharya. The ceremony was performed by Sri Sankaracharya of Kamakoti Peetham, Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Swamigal, widely known as the Sage of Kanchi. What started as a detailed and colourful bit of reporting of this rare event, eventually transformed itself into an unfinished biography of the sage himself.

The encouraging reception this series received, awakened the author to the immense possibilities of beating a new path in the terrain of travelogue writing. He undertook a journey to some of the religious centres and holy places in Upper India. His observations and experiences were serialised in the journal under the title *Alaya Dharisanam*, which swelled the readership and increased his fan-mail. Hundreds of admirers hailed the articles for being fresh in approach, forthright and lucid in style, religiously educative and spiritually enlightening. Bharanidharan soon became a household name among the Tamil-reading public and found an assured niche in their hearts.

Since then, the author has become a regular and painstaking traveller to the sacred shrines and holy places of

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India. He has toured extensively in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. He has trekked the difficult trails leading to the famous Himalayan shrines of Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, Yamnotri and Gomukh. Vivid descriptions and lively sketches of all these places and of the lifestyles of the people living there are to be found in the author's many articles, which not only serve as useful guides to prospective travellers but also inculcate in others a feeling of participation in the journey, experiencing as they do all the thrills, hazards, and the emotional sublimations the author himself passed through.

The recording of his experiences in travelogues in *Ananda Vikatan* were eagerly awaited by its multi-lakh readership week after week. Whatever he wrote in *Ananda Vikatan* has later been published in book-form. Nearly a dozen titles in Tamil have so far been released and all of them have proved to be bestsellers. The demand for these books is indeed perennial.

Six Mystics of India, another book in this vein, is Bharanidharan's maiden effort in English.

Besides specialising in travelogues, Bharanidharan, under the pseudonym 'Marina', has written 16 plays against contemporary social backgrounds and domestic settings. They have been very popular with the readers as well as theatre-goers, for their true-to-life depictions, wholesome humour, satirical touches and witty yet weighty dialogues.

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Glossary

abhishekam ... Holy bath for sacred idols
adhishtanam ... A particular spot, generally sacred tomb
Advaita ... Monism
agni ... Fire
Agni Deva ... God of Fire
Agni Suktha ... Hymn to propitiate and invoke the God of Fire
agraharam ... Brahmin sector of a village or town
Amma ... Mother, Madam
apath sanyasa ... Renunciation according to Shastric injunctions and rituals when on the threshold of death
aradhana ... Worship. Also the annual ceremony performed in memory of an anchorite
arathi ... The ritual of swirling a light or camphor before an image or picture of God or a Holy personage
ashram/am ... Hermitage
ashrama ... The four stages of a Man's life, referred to as *ashramas*; *Brahmacharya* (bachelorhood), *grihasthya* (family life), *vanaprastha* (retreat from active life for the loosening of bonds) and *sanyasa* (absolute renunciation)
Ashtasahasram ... A sect among Brahmins
asura ... Demon

bandobust ... Watch and ward duty
Bhagavad Gita ... Song of God — part of the epic *Mahabharatha*

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Bhagavatha ... Life of Lord Krishna written by the sage Vyasa
bhajans ... Sacred songs in praise of gods and goddesses
bhaktha ... A person who has unwavering faith and devotion in God or his Master
bhakthi ... Faith
bhashya ... Exhaustive commentary of spiritual texts
bhoothaganas ... The celestials who assist the Gods
boondhi ... A snack
Brahma ... The Creator among the Trinity
brahmachari ... A man who has taken vows of celibacy for pursuit of the spiritual; unmarried person
Brahma Jnani ... A person who has realised the ultimate Truth
Brindavan(am) ... The sacred place in Northern India associated with Lord Krishna's life. Here it denotes the place of interment of a sanyasi
Brindavana Pravesa ... entering the pit that is intended to be the final resting place

Chaturmasya Vratha ... Sanyasis must stay in a particular place during the four rainy months and observe austerities
chandan/a/m ... Sandal paste
chappals ... Leather sandals
cheri ... Village
Chinmudra ... Symbolically bringing the right thumb and index finger together to impart the knowledge of ultimate Truth and wisdom as shown by Dakshinamurthi, the World-Master, an aspect of Lord Siva

danda ... Holy staff
darbar ... Royal court
darshan ... Seeing — a word used in connection with reverentially looking at the images of deities or Holy persons in order to receive their blessings
devas ... Celestial demi-gods

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Devendra ... Indira — the head of the *devas*
dewan ... Chief Minister or advisor to a local rajah.
dhakshina ... Cash gifts
dharma ... The right behaviour and principled conduct
Dharma Devata ... Presiding deity of virtue and righteousness
dhuni ... An oven
dosai, idli, vadai, uppuma ... South Indian dishes
Durga Suktham ... Hymns to Durga, Devi

fakir ... Religious mendicant

gandharvas ... Celestial beings
Gayathri Mantra ... incantations invoking the Sun God
gopuram ... Temple tower
guru ... Teacher or Master

illam ... House

jai ... Victory
japa ... Silent prayer
jeeva ... Life force
Jeeva Samadhi ... Spiritually evolved person who can at will, through his yogic powers, shed his mortal coils while in the state of *samadhi*. It is believed that the vibrancy of the life forces continues to be present in such places and blesses the devoted
Jeevan Mukta ... Liberated soul
ji ... A term of respect
jnana sanyasa ... A life of spiritual renunciation
jnani ... Person of wisdom, who maintains equanimity in all situations

Kalpatharu ... The heavenly tree
Kamadhenu ... The divine cow
Karma ... Duty. Also a person's actions in previous births

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kashaya ... Ochre robes of a sanyasi
kuladeiva/m ... Family deity
kumkum ... Vermilion powder

laddu, halwa ... Sweetmeats
linga/m ... The symbol of Lord Siva

Madhwacharya ... The founder of the Dualistic philosophy called Dwaitham
Mahabharatha ... The epic story of the Pandava brothers
maha vakyas ... Profound epigrammatic statements in the Vedas, e.g. *Aham Brambhasmi* — I am Brahman
Mahasamadhi ... the great event of casting away of the body
maistry ... Supervisor, master craftsman — here used in connection with masonry construction
mala ... Necklace, garland
mandir ... Temple
mantap/am ... Hall
mantra ... Incantation
Mooka Panchadasi ... Five hundred hymns on the Goddess poured out by the dumb poet Mooka
mutt ... The headquarters of a religious leader or Pontiff

nadaswaram ... Musical instrument, played mainly in temples and on auspicious occasions
Naga *asana* ... One of the snake postures in yoga; also a pedestal shaped like a snake
namaha ... 'Prostrations to thy Holy name'
namaskar ... Hand-sign of worship and greeting
neem ... A tree with medicinal property

Padmasana ... One of the many postures prescribed for the practice of yoga — *Padma* = lotus
palki ... Palanquin
Panchangam ... Almanac

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pandals ... Temporary halls and other structures suitably decorated
patasala ... A school
pyal ... A raised platform built in the front of old-style houses or choultries
peepul ... A sacred tree, the Bo-tree
poorvashrama ... A person's previous state in the order of the four stages of Hindu spiritual life — (See: *ashrama*)
prasad/am ... Holy water, eatables, sacred ash, vermilion, sandal paste, flowers and *thulasi* leaves offered to devotees in temples or by the spiritual heads of mutts
Purana ... Ancient story or mythology

raga ... Melody
Ramayana ... The epic story of Sri Rama
ratha ... Wooden chariot of the gods
roti ... Bread made of wheat flour
Rudra Bhoomi ... The land of Rudra (Lord Siva)

Saami ... Lord, Master (colloquially)
sadhu/sanyasi ... A recluse, a person who has renounced the pleasures of the world
Sakthi ... The female principle in Hinduism
samadhi ... The complete merging of the Self in the infinite, a state which is indescribable; Sacred tomb
samsthan ... An administrative body
sambar ... Dhal-based thick soup
Sambhavi Mudra ... Signalling the posture of Goddess Parvathi
sanctum sanctorum ... The innermost shrine of a temple where the main deity is housed
Sandhya Vandana ... Offerings to Sun God
Sanyasa Paarai ... Slab in memory of the sanyasi
sapta ... Seven
satyagraha ... Non-cooperation
sayabu ... Muslim gentleman

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Sayanarathi ... Rituals performed when putting the deity to sleep at the end of the day's worship
shandy ... Weekly markets
Shastras ... Spiritual and metaphysical sciences
Siddha ... An extraordinary person with superhuman powers and intuitive perception
Siddha Purusha ... A person who had attained Siddhahood
Siddhis ... Supernatural powers. By severe practices a person can attain eight supernatural occult powers, one of them being performing miracles, such as materialising objects at will
Siva ... The Destroyer among the Trinity
Sivalinga ... Symbol of Lord Siva
Sivarathri ... The night considered sacred for worship of Lord Siva
sloka ... A holy couplet
Sri Vidya cult ... Pertaining to and based on goddess worship
Subhadra Parinayam ... Wedding of Subhadra, wife of Arjuna of the *Mahabharatha*
Suprabhatham ... Ritual performed to awaken the deity early in the morning, known as *Thiruppalliyezhuchi* in Tamil
sutra ... Profound truths hidden in brief statements
swami/yar ... Holy person, one who has renounced the world, Lord, Master
swayambhumurthi ... A self-created idol

Tahsildar ... Revenue officer
Tantra ... One of the sciences of worship as ordained in the Vedas
tapas ... Deep contemplation of the Supreme Power for long periods
tapasya ... *Tapas*
therukkoothu ... street theatre
thirumangalyam ... Sacred cord worn by women symbolising marriage

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thulasi ... A sacred plant; basil plant
tilak ... Mark, usually of vermilion, put on forehead

udhi ... Sacred ash
upadesa ... Precept, set of mantras
upanayanam ... Sacred thread-wearing ceremony prescribed for Brahmin boys
upasaka ... A person engaged in spiritual pursuits

Varuna Suktha ... Hymn to propitiate and invoke the Rain God
Veda ... Unwritten Hindu scriptural text of knowledge of the Universe and Self
Veda Dharma ... The righteous Path shown by the Vedas
Veda Vyasa ... The sage who originally codified the Vedas
Veena ... Stringed musical instrument
vel ... Weapon of Muruga, the son of Siva
vibhuthi ... Sacred ash
vimana ... Celestial vehicle

yagna ... Sacrificial offering in fire
yagnasaala/yagasaala ... The shed where the sacrificial offering takes place
yantra ... Consecrated and sanctified talisman
yoga ... Effect union. Spiritual practice to merge the individual self with the infinite
yoga maya ... Delusion
yoga siddha ... A person who attains spiritual powers by yogic practices
yoganidra ... Apparently in deep sleep, yet aware of everything happening around (Lord Narayana's repose in the Milky Ocean)
yogi ... A person who has perfected yoga

zamindar ... Landlord of vast tracts of land
zari ... Silver or gold thread

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The Saint of Mantralaya

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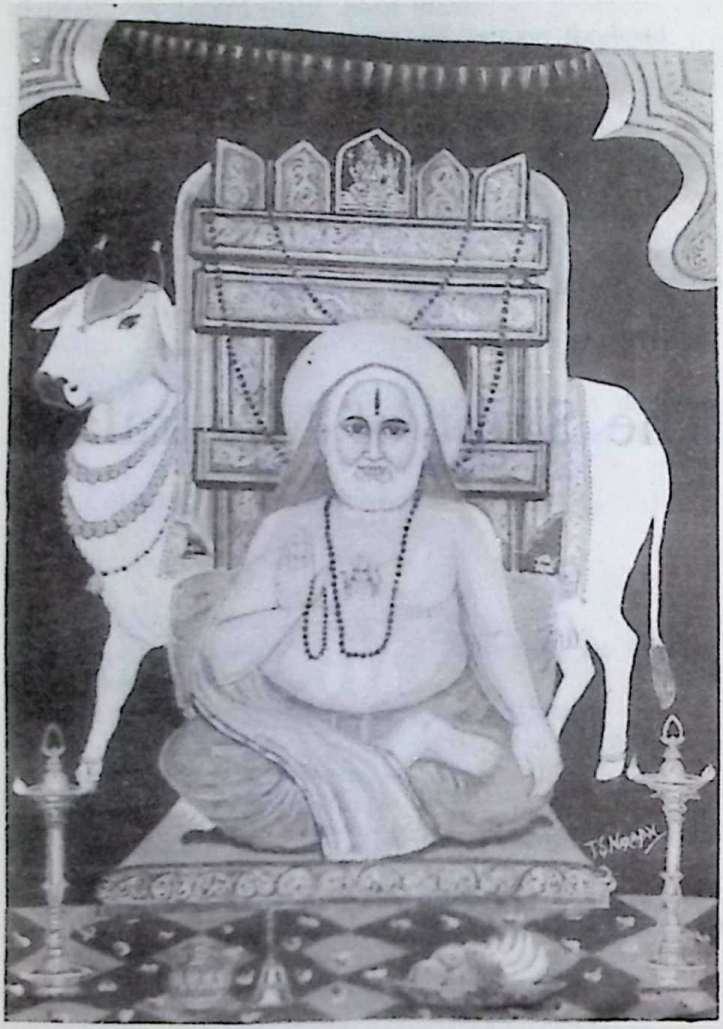

Sri Raghavendra Swamigal

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Poojyaya Raghavendraya Satya Dharma Radhayacha
Bhajatam Kalpa Vrukshaya Namatham Kamadenave

* * *

Sri Raghavendra, a memorable saint of the Madhwa school of philosophy, lived in the 17th Century. As the final hour of his earthly existence drew nearer and nearer, he had a brick and mortar chamber built by his followers and stepped into it as casually as he would enter his pooja room. He settled himself comfortably in the chamber, sang a song composed by him in praise of his Lord and then ordered those standing around, still and speechless, to seal the cell. The command of the Master was executed with unquestioning obedience by his faithful followers, even as their hands trembled and tears rolled down their cheeks.

The Saint made himself disappear thus in Mantralaya, now a small town in the Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh. You have to get down at Mantralaya Road Railway Station on the Madras-Bombay line and reach by bus or taxi the *Brindavanam* of the saint, about 15 km away.

We reached the enclosure where the *Brindavanam* of the saint had been built. We had to have a bath before we entered these premises, so we went to the banks of the

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River Tungabhadra, which flowed just behind the enclosure. It was mid-January, and the river looked rather famished, with rocks and boulders jutting out prominently. We had a hurried bath and dried our clothes on the several granite surfaces visible.

When we entered the temple-like enclosure and crossed the courtyard, we saw half a dozen devotees — men and women in wet clothes — circumambulating the holy *samadhi* of Sri Raghavendra Swami. The manager of the Mutt, Srinivasa Rao, informed us that the daily pooja was on and that, after witnessing it, we could look around the Mutt. He said, as we walked along, "Mantralaya *Brindavanam* is essentially a place where devotees get their wishes fulfilled. Here, Sri Raghavendra Swami is believed to still live, because he entered his *samadhi* chamber alive. For that reason, this *Brindavanam* is considered a *Jeeva Samadhi*. He answers the prayers of his devotees. People throng here all through the year to fulfil vows. We provide boarding and lodging facilities for them. Persons have come here with incurable diseases and gone back completely cured. Sri Raghavendra assumes different human forms to help the needy and the deserving. He is a visible god on earth in this Kali Age. We have no doubt about it." There was a divine and spiritual air about the surroundings that helped us accept as truth the Manager's statements.

Before he entered *samadhi,* Sri Raghavendra declared, "I will live here for seven hundred years from now, blessing the faithful persons who come to me for succour and solace".

Verily I felt it a truthful statement when I had *darshan* at the Saint's *Brindavanam* for the first time. To the right

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of the Moola *Brindavanam,* daily worship of Sri Moola Rama was going on. About two hundred persons sat there, watching the pooja with devotion and piety writ large on their faces. On the *pyal* nearby, some boys were chanting Vedic mantras.

I learnt from Srinivasa Rao that the sanyasi performing the pooja in silent absorption was Sri Sujayendra Theertha Swamigal, the 18th Pontiff of the Sri Raghavendra Mutt.

After the pooja, the Swamigal himself packed the main deities. He held each idol in his raised hand before packing it in cloth, so that everyone could have a clear view of it. As the guru lifted each idol, a person, who stood some distance away with a silver cane, reverentially announced the names of the deities: 'Sri Moola Devaru', 'Sri Jayarama Devaru', 'Sri Digvijaya Devaru', 'Sri Santana Gopalakrishna Devaru' and so on. This manner of introduction was indeed novel; it was a procedure the assembled devotees responded to ecstatically.

This idol of Moola Rama, the original Rama, was made by a celestial sculptor and worshipped by the God of Creation, Brahma. It was given by Him to Jabali, from whom Lord Siva, the God of Destruction, took it for His daily worship. The idol again changed hands and, ultimately, came into the possession of the King of Kalinga (modern Orissa). Narahari Theertha, a disciple of Sri Madhwacharya, brought it from the royal palace and gave it to his Master. His descendants continue to worship the idol, which is now part of the daily pooja of the Sri Raghavendra Swami Mutt at Mantralaya.

The tiny golden Santana Gopalakrishna idol, an excellent work of art, is only two inches in height and has

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chiselled features. It is believed to be the handiwork of Sri Raghavendra Swami himself.

The pooja over, the Pontiff offered prayers at the *Brindavanams* of his previous gurus. Later, we were entertained to a sumptuous and tasty lunch. We were told that, on an average, about five hundred persons were daily served such a lunch and without any charge. The number has been increasing ever since.

Mantralaya is comparable to Amaravathi, the abode of Devendra, and Sri Raghavendra Swamigal to the Celestial Tree, Kalpatharu, which supplies our wants perennially. Those who have a *darshan* at the sage's *Brindavanam* are believed to be insulated from the evil effects of the Kali Age. So everyone, irrespective of his or her religion or caste, desires to visit Mantralaya at least once in his or her lifetime. Every year, on the *aradhana* day, the day on which the Saint shed his mortal coils, thousands of the fervent faithful throng the *Brindavanam.*

* * *

The great life and mission of Sri Raghavendra is an inspiring tale.

Krishna Bhatta was a great exponent of the *veena*, the musical instrument, at the court of the Vijayanagara Emperor. A learned pundit in the Vedas and Shastras, he was also an expert exponent of Madhwa philosophy. His son, Kanakachala Bhatta, was an equally great Vedic scholar, a gifted musician and a court poet.

Kanakachala's son Thimmanna Bhatta, and his wife Gopikambal, had no children, so they went to the Lord of the Seven Hills, their family deity, to pray for a child. Lord Venkateswara answered their prayers and blessed

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them with a female child, whom they, in gratitude to the Lord, named Venkatambal. When they had a second child, they named him Gururaja.

Thimmanna, who once visited Kanchipuram with his family to have *darshan* of Sri Varadaraja Perumal, settled in a village nearby called Bhuvanagiri. This was his ancestral home and in it numerous Brahmins, wedded to the Vedic way of life, lived and thrived. Very many pious Madhwas came to him for elucidation and elaboration of the spiritual texts.

Though Thimmanna led a happy life outwardly, he lacked inner peace. He yearned for another son and went to his family deity and implored His blessings once again. Sri Venkatachalapathi obliged him with another son, whom he named Venkata Bhatta. Those who saw the child found in its face the charm and lustre of Mahavishnu, as he reclined on the serpent god Sesha in the milky ocean.

Thimmanna Bhatta joyously returned to Bhuvanagiri, where, like a dutiful father, he had his daughter Venkatambal married to Sri Lakshmi Narasimhachar of Madurai. He then celebrated the marriage of his first son Gururaja and trained him in the study of spiritual texts. When old age began to tell on him, Thimmanna fell sick and was bedridden. Realising that the inevitable end was around the corner, he called his first son to his bedside and asked him to take care of Venkata Bhatta, also known as Venkatanatha. He then breathed his last.

Gururaja performed the *upanayanam* of his seven-year-old brother Venkata Bhatta and sent him to Madurai, to study under the guidance of his brother-in-law Narasimhachar. Venkata Bhatta acquired great proficiency

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in the Vedas, poetry, drama etc., and distinguished himself in allied Shastras, like Tarka, Vyakarna, and Meemamsa. He developed a flair for metaphysical subjects. He seemed to instinctively possess skills in every art under the sun, though he pretended to his guru that he was acquiring knowledge only slowly. Immensely pleased with the sharp intellect and rare accomplishments of his younger brother and satisfied with his studies, Gururaja brought him back to Bhuvanagiri and got him married to Saraswathi Bai, a girl of good family but humble origin.

The drab life of a family man held no attraction for Venkata Bhatta. He wanted to study the works of Sri Madhwacharya, and the commentaries on them written by Sri Jaya Theertha and Sri Vyasaraya. He went to Kumbakonam in Thanjavur District in search of a guru.

Sri Sudheendra Theertha was the reigning pontiff of the Madhwa Mutt in Kumbakonam. He was a direct disciple of Sri Vijayendra Swamigal, a profound scholar of Dwaita thought and literature. Many Adwaita and Saiva pundits had been vanquished by the latter in Vedantic debates.

Sudheendra Theertha was attracted by the charm of Venkatanatha's personality, his dulcet tones and amiable manners and was convinced that he was a rare genius. When the latter expressed his desire to be one of his disciples, the former readily agreed.

Seeing the newcomer become the favourite of their Master, the other disciples grew jealous and carried all sorts of tales about him. They complained to the Master that Venkatanatha neglected his studies and was drowsing most of the time. The Master said that he would take care of it.

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One night, the Master went to the hall where all the disciples slept. There were no lamps or books, absolutely no trace of their having studied before they retired for the night. They were stretched out at awkward angles, snoring noisily. The Master searched in vain for Venkatanatha among them. He then went to the backyard of the Mutt and, lo, there he found his favourite disciple, lying on bare ground, without a pillow or a cover, unmindful of the cold. He saw burnt twigs and leaves on one side of the young man, on the other he found the *Nyaya Sudha,* a treatise by Jaya Theertha on Madhwa's *Brahma Sutra Bhashya,* some rare palm leaves and an iron stylus. The Master collected the palm leaves, covered the sleeping disciple with his own upper cloth without disturbing him, and silently retraced his steps.

When Venkatanatha woke the next morning, he was taken aback by the absence of the palm leaves and the presence of the ochre-coloured cloth over him. Concluding that it must have been a trick played on him by his co-disciples, he reported it to the Master. Sudheendra Theertha assured him of an enquiry and sent him away.

After lunch, the Master called all the disciples to his room and related to them in detail what he had seen and done the previous night. Venkatanatha had written a commentary to *Nyaya Sudha* overnight, using the burning twigs for light. His annotations were revealing to the Master himself. When the other disciples heard their guru paying handsome tributes to the erudition of Venkatanatha, they begged his pardon for their childish behaviour. Sri Sudheendra named the treatise *Sudha Parimalam* and, thenceforward, Venkatanatha was known as Parimalacharya.

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After staying in Kumbakonam for over a year, Venkatanatha returned to Bhuvanagiri and rejoined his family. News of his wide learning, his deep study of the Shastras, his knowledge of spiritual lore spread far and wide and many an aspirant came to him seeking guidance.

The Goddess of Learning, Saraswathi, reigned supreme in that humble abode. But Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, was conspicuous by her absence! Venkatanatha's family was in the grip of penury. When Saraswathi Bai gave birth to a male child, Venkatanatha named his son Lakshminarayana, possibly in the expectation that Goddess Lakshmi would shower Her blessings on them, and uttered the name day in and day out. But Venkatanatha's family continued to struggle in abject poverty.

Unable to maintain the family, Venkatanatha left the house in search of a living. But he was against selling his learning or begging from the rich. He was born to serve the Almighty, not to slave for mortals for a morsel of food. With unflinching faith in divine dispensation, he moved on to the next village.

That day, there was a grand feast in the village and many were busy with the preparations. As Venkatanatha passed by, one of them mistook him for a mendicant, called him inside the house, and assigned him the job of grinding *chandana* paste. Venkatanatha, desirous of exhibiting his mastery over the mantras, ground the *chandanam,* while chanting the *Agni Suktha.*

The lunch over, the Brahmins, as was customary, smeared their bodies liberally with the *chandana* paste, but, in a trice, they were writhing and shouting because they felt a burning sensation all over their bodies. The headman grew angry, and wanted to know who prepared

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the paste. Venkatanatha was produced before him.

When the owner of the house saw the enchanting face of Venkatanatha, resplendent with divine lustre, he at once knew he had wronged a venerable person. He wept with remorse and fell at his feet, seeking his pardon. Venkatanatha smilingly chanted the *Varuna Suktha* mantra and offered the remaining *chandanam* to the Brahmins. When they smeared it, they immediately felt cool. The headman, happy over his intuition, fed Venkatanatha well, and gave him money and materials when he left.

Venkatanatha spent the entire money in a few days. The idea of earning more money by exhibiting his occult powers was repugnant to him and, so, his family continued to suffer in poverty.

God always subjects his devotees to innumerable tests. The sincere and steadfast ones, refusing to break under the severest of stresses and strains, surrender completely to His Will, singing His praises and seeking His presence. Venkatanatha was one such true and humble *bhaktha*, and his wife, Saraswathi Bai, true to her nature and traditional upbringing, and unmindful of the next meal, lent her husband a helping hand in leading a virtuous and honest life.

Seeing that her husband was always engrossed in a spiritual quest, Saraswathi Bai, one day suggested that they go to Kumbakonam and surrender themselves to Sri Sudheendra Swamigal, his Master and preceptor. Venkatanatha jumped with joy at the suggestion, as he was ever eager to continue his studies of philosophic truths and Vedic literature.

Little did poor Saraswathi Bai realise at the time that, because of this trip, she would be separated from her

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husband, whom destiny would choose for the life of a recluse and that, because of this unexpected turn in her life, she would commit suicide and be condemned to eternal damnation.

Sri Sudheendrar welcomed his disciple's family with a smile and open arms. He was moved beyond words to learn that a great scholar and a man of wisdom should suffer because of poverty, and ordered that all arrangements be made to make his stay in the Mutt as comfortable as possible.

As for Venkatanatha, his spiritual demands were greater than his physical hunger. He realised that what he knew was very little and his ignorance was as vast as this world itself. He sat at his Master's feet to learn more and more. The Master himself got fresh insights while discussing and debating intricate and abstruse points with his disciple. In due course, Venkatanatha was made the Chief Pundit of the Mutt, and the name and fame of the Mutt spread far and wide.

Apart from learning from his Master, Venkatanatha delved deep into several books and did research in various fields. Whenever he was not engaged in his studies, he helped students who sought his guidance. He was at once a disciple and a guru.

Venkatanatha was not merely an erudite scholar with an encyclopaedic knowledge, but he was also endowed with a rare debating skill and a flair for words while expressing himself. He was peerless in upholding and defending the Madhwa school of philosophy in discussions. He invariably accompanied his Master on his tours. During one such sojourn, at Rajamannarkudi in Thanjavur District, Venkatanatha vanquished renowned scholars and

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theorists from different schools of philosophy and doctrines. Sudheendrar's happiness at the exploits of his pupil knew no bounds.

Sri Sudheendra Swami, aging and in rapidly declining health, felt he would not live long. He was anxious to nominate his successor. He resolved to make Venkatanatha a monk and entrust the affairs of the Mutt to his care. But when he shared his thoughts with Venkatanatha, the latter declined the honour, explaining: "Oh Master, I am not old enough to give up family life and become an ascetic. My wife, young and loving, is greatly attached to me and she has nobody else to depend upon. My young son is yet to be initiated into Brahminhood. As far as I am concerned, I am still attracted to mundane pleasures and temptations of all kinds. It is utterly impossible for me to lead a life of absolute detachment and singleminded concentration. Under these circumstances, if I don the ochre robes of a monk, I can at best be an actor, never a sanyasi in the true sense of the word. My mind is not ready for the transformation and I do not want to be a hypocrite, deceiving the world and compromising my conscience."

Every word of Venkatanatha sounded so genuine, it echoed in the heart of the Master, rendering him speechless. However, as his health deteriorated, he hastily initiated another disciple to take his place, naming him Yadavendra. In a few days, the Master recovered completely. Yadavendra, the new pontiff, thereupon took some idols from the Master for his personal worship and proceeded on a pilgrimage.

Months passed. Sudheendrar fell ill again and was bedridden. The thought that, if he passed away before Yadavendra returned, the Mutt would be bereft of a pontiff to

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perform the worship of the Moola Rama idol, upset the Master. He badly wanted to persuade Venkatanatha and install him as the next pontiff. He prayed silently to Lord Ramachandra. He pleaded, "Oh Raghava, only you can change Venkatanatha's mind". And Lord Ramachandra, who appeared in his dream that night, assured him that Venkatanatha would oblige him and become the head of the Mutt and the latter's fame as a genius would spread to distant lands.

The next day, the Master discussed the succession issue in private with his disciple. He convinced him of his qualifications for being the head of the Mutt. He stressed the evanescent nature of worldly pleasures. He explained in great detail that for one who was interested in writing a glossary for the Vedic texts, the life of a sanyasi was ideally suited. At the end, he even narrated his dream, in which Lord Ramachandra had appeared.

Venkatanatha became a picture of confusion. It was no easy task for him to reject the appeal of his Master whom he held in high esteem. In this troubled mental state, he began to reflect:

"If the very God, whose mouthpiece my Master is, has ordained that I lead a different life, what can I, a poor mortal, do? Yet how can I desert my loving wife? Can I live away from her beauty and charm? Alas, who will take care of my darling Lakshminarayanan, still a toddler? However, if I do as suggested by my Master and get free from the bonds of family life, I will have ample time to compile many research works and prepare treatises on Vedic texts. Only then will I have lived a purposeful life. But how can Saraswathi Bai live without me?"

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Roaring waves of conflicting thoughts disturbed his slumber. He tossed and turned in his bed till midnight, when his tired eyelids at last closed.

The next moment, a dazzling effulgence lit the room as if the sun had suddenly appeared on the horizon. The scent of the blooming jasmine spread everywhere. The jingling of bells filled the air. An apparition, a divine damsel, appeared before Venkatanatha and sat near his bed. She was a portrait of perfection, wearing a milk-white saree, an enchanting smile on her lips, bedecked in jewellery made of rare metals and rarer gems. She looked at Venkatanatha with fixed eyes, emitting divine grace. The coolness of the full moon bathed his body and soothed his heart.

"Oh, Mother, who are thou? What brought you here?" enquired Venkatanatha in a tremulous voice. The beautiful damsel replied, "Oh, true Brahmin, I am the Goddess of Learning and the Arts. Veda Vyasa, the immortal sage, created me for the recreation of scholars. I am very close to Sri Ananda Theertha, who became the great Madhwacharya. When others neglected the Vedas, which proclaim and trumpet my glory, Poorna Prajna (Madhwa) took an interest in me. He fed me with the *Brahma Sutra Bhashya*. I grew up in the lap of Sri Jaya Teertha, known as Theekachariar. Afterwards, I was patronised by Sri Vyasaraya, a king among saints. His two great works, *Nyayamrta Chandrika* and *Tarka Thandava* were my palace and my dance stage. Going in search of charm and youth, I met Vijayendrar. That genius of pure wisdom showered his love and affection on me. He presented me with a *Kantakodhar* — a nice and expensive saree. He gave me a diamond necklace, the *Nyayamoutikamala*."

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She continued: "Your Master, Sri Sudheendrar, wrote a commentary on the *Bhagavatha* and enhanced my prestige. His *Subhadra Parinayam* is a jewel adorning my forehead. Now, I have come to thee. You should not reject anybody who has surrendered unto thee. If I should live in honour and with fame, you must write a gloss for *Chandrika*. And also, by your writing, the Vedas must flourish. Vaishnavism must be enriched by your contributions. Religious fervour and divine faith must engulf the globe. Veda Vyasa had willed that I must surrender heart and soul to those who worship Moola Rama. Lord Ramachandramurti Himself had ordained that you must emancipate those who seek your guidance and it is but proper that you should create the necessary atmosphere by changing your life and activities. There is no escape from it. The call of duty is unmistakable. Future generations need your invaluable service and sacrifice. As the occupant of this seat of learning and knowledge, you are bound to shine as the peerless monarch of the Vedantic empire. This is your destiny. Nobody has the power to alter it. I have no refuge except you. Do not be anxious about anything. Your efforts are destined to be crowned with success. May you be blessed in all your endeavours."

Having spoken thus, Goddess Saraswathi whispered certain incantations in Venkatanatha's ear and vanished. So did the bright light, but the sweet voice kept ringing in Venkatanatha's ear. Venkatanatha was in ecstasy. No more was there any vacillation in his mind. Goddess Saraswathi's mantra cleared his mind of all confusion and he was transformed into a picture of peace and tranquillity.

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Obsessed with what had happened to him, he relapsed into a semi-conscious state and Sri Rama, Narahari, Venugopala and Veda Vyasa appeared to bless him. When he awoke at dawn he was a transformed person.

Venkatanatha surrendered to the Divine Will and decided to snap all family ties, renounce wordly pleasures and become a sanyasi. He looked at his sleeping wife and son for a fleeting second but immediately turned away with a resolute heart. He walked away stoically like a new Buddha.

Saraswathi Bai had already surmised that Sudheendrar was determined to snatch her husband from family life, but she suppressed her emotions and did not whisper a word to her husband. Venkatanatha too restrained himself from revealing his resolution. Both husband and wife played hide-and-seek with each other, putting on a brave face, concealing their mental torture.

Venkatanatha had an early bath, went through his morning ablutions and, hastening to the Mutt, fell at his Master's feet. He said:

"Oh, Master, I owe my present position to your kindness and grace. I am but your slave. I do not have a separate existence hereafter. I shall gladly accept the life you choose for me. I recognise the hand of destiny in this. This is the path shown to me by Sri Rama. This is the mission Goddess Saraswathi has enjoined on me. I submit myself to thee heart and soul. Please accept me."

Venkatanatha buried his head in his Master's feet and held them tight.

The Master's heart melted.

"Oh, my noble disciple, get up. You are twice blessed. Casting away the ephemeral pleasures of life, you are

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accepting the crown of an indestructible empire. With your rare sacrifice you will be the envy of all, even the gods."

Venkatanatha rose involuntarily and stood motionless, devoid of any emotional disturbances.

As Sudheendrar was well aware of Saraswathi Bai's deep attachment to her husband, he was reluctant to ordain him in her presence, lest anything untoward happen. Hence he took Venkatanatha to Thanjavur, about thirty miles away.

It was the year of grace 1621. Raghunatha Bhoopal was the reigning monarch of Thanjavur. He opened the gates of his palace for the consecration ceremony.

Great savants and scholars assembled in the durbar hall. In their presence, and with their blessings, Sudheendrar bestowed *Sanyasa Ashrama* on Venkatanatha after due ceremony. Since the Lord Raghava himself had appeared in his dream and blessed him, Venkatanatha was named afresh as Sri Raghavendra. The Master whispered the Moola Mantra into Raghavendra's ear, anointed him with holy water, and made him the Supreme Ruler of his spiritual empire.

The news of her husband's *sanyasa* came as a rude shock to Saraswathi Bai. In spite of the poverty at home, she had always enjoyed the loving care of her husband. She was now denied the pleasure of his company. He might well be dead as far as she was concerned. "What right have I to live when my husband is no more?" she reflected and concluded that she must end her life at once. But suicide, her conscience said, was a great sin. However, she silenced her conscience: for a woman to live after her husband's death was a far greater sin than

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committing suicide. In inconsolable agony, she jumped into the nearest well and was drowned.

Later, her spirit haunted her husband, sometimes speaking words of love, at others times wailing and screaming. Sympathising with her lot, Sri Raghavendra sprinkled holy water and uttered potent incantations to emancipate her.

* * *

Sri Raghavendra continued to stay in the Vijayendrar Mutt on the banks of the Kaveri at Kumbakonam, and his fame spread far and wide. The lustre in his eyes attracted all those who saw him, his body shone with a golden hue emitting a divine glow around him, his long arms reminded devotees of Sri Rama. *Thulasi* leaves always adorned his ears and his caste mark was prominent on his forehead. His shoulders were broad and his chest shapely. Goddess Saraswathi danced on his tongue. Those who had his *darshan* were relieved of their worries and their misery, attaining enlightenment and purity.

Sudheendra Swamigal, immensely pleased with his disciple's attainments and achievements, left for Hampi on the banks of the Tungabhadra where he attained *samadhi*.

Yadavendra, on hearing of his Master's end, returned to Kumbakonam. Raghavendra received him with full Mutt honours. He even thought of restoring the Mutt to his pontifical care, but his disciples stood firmly against it. Surrendering the idols in his possession to Raghavendra, Yadavendra left to spend his last years in meditation on the banks of the River Krishna in Andhra Pradesh.

Raghavendra's daily routine started with a bath in the Kaveri river, a visit to the Sri Kumbheswarar and

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Sarangapani temples and worship at the *samadhi* of his Master's Master, Vijayendra. He would then perform the pooja of Sri Moola Rama and attend to the affairs of the Mutt. He would spend the rest of the day exchanging ideas and comparing notes with the large number of scholars and savants who visited the Mutt. He taught those who sought his help, read voraciously and produced many original treatises on various subjects.

A grim famine now engulfed the Chola country and the reigning chieftain, Vijayaraghava Naik, had to empty his coffers to meet the crisis. But the people's suffering showed no signs of abating. The benevolent ruler, who had heard of the mystic powers and saintly qualities of Raghavendra, went to Kumbakonam to request him to come to Thanjavur and shower his blessings on his subjects.

The saint readily obliged. He came to Thanjavur and donated generously for famine relief, and offered prayers and *yagnas* to propitiate the rain gods. The army guarded the *yagnasaala*. Soon, dark clouds gathered in the sky and it rained torrentially, to the joy of everyone.

Marvelling at the miracle performed by the saint, the king fell at his feet and, as a token of his gratitude, presented him with a priceless diamond necklace. Sri Raghavendra threw it in the fire that he kept burning day and night. The king thought this was an insult and was in mental torment.

Reading the king's mind, the saint prayed to the god of fire, who restored the necklace in a trice. Overwhelmed by this act, the king was moved to tears and begged the saint's pardon for having misunderstood him. Raghavendra told him that it was not meant to be an affront. He only

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wanted to present the necklace to the god of fire as a token of his gratitude.

After twelve years in Thanjavur, Raghavendra returned to Kumbakonam.

* * *

Those who renounce the world and take to the life of an anchorite, are expected to be constantly on the move. They do not stay in one place. They are ordained to undertake pilgrimages, preaching their gospels and reminding the masses of the need to pursue the path of truth and righteousness by performing the duties enjoined in our spiritual texts. It is the sacred duty of the heads of religious *mutts* to travel the length and breadth of India. In pursuance of this injunction, Sri Raghavendra also undertook long and arduous journeys. After covering the southern parts of Tamil Nadu, he toured Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra and Maharashtra, as they are known today, worshipping in temples and bathing in holy waters.

The truly learned one is hailed wherever he goes and this was verily true of Raghavendra. He distinguished himself with his consummate skill in debating, profundity of thought, and depth of insight, while delivering philosophical discourses.

Once, in the course of his pilgrimage, Raghavendra met three astrologers who came to receive his *darshan*. The saint showed his horoscope to them and asked them to determine his longevity. All three made elaborate calculations and arrived at different figures. While one astrologer said he would live a hundred years, the second predicted three hundred years and the third one stated that

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the saint would live to be seven hundred. Those sitting around him were confused by these different readings, but the saint smiled and said, "All three astrologers are correct." The disciples who were confounded waited for further elucidation by the Master. He then explained, "My body will last for a hundred years, my writings will shine even after three hundred years, and I will reside in my *Brindavanam* for seven hundred years".

One day, three Brahmins, who were on their way to receive his *darshan,* wondered aloud if they would be properly fed at the *mutt.* On reaching Kumbakonam, they went to the Kaveri for a bath. One of the disciples of Raghavendra, who was washing the *kashaya* (ochre-coloured clothes) of his Master, told the Brahmins not to worry about their food. They would be looked after wéll in the *mutt.* The guests were surprised that this person knew what they had been discussing long before they had entered the town. They asked him if he could tell them what they were thinking just then. The disciple said that he had no special powers. He could not read their minds at that moment as his Master's *kashaya* was not in his hands. It was in the water. The Brahmins realised that he could read their minds only because of the *kashaya* of his guru. "If the mere clothes of the Master could enable a person to read our thoughts, what mystical powers the saint must have!" they thought.

In the *mutt,* Raghavendra Swamigal bestowed special attention on the three guests, looking after their requirements with great care. They felt embarrassed and begged his pardon for having doubted his hospitality. The saint blessed them and said, "After my disappearance from the world, you will be entrusted with the task of performing

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the daily pooja to my *Brindavanam* and you will get the *prasad* daily without fail". Even today, it is the descendants of these Brahmins who are in charge of the pooja of the *Brindavanam* at Mantralaya.

After visiting southern towns like Srirangam, Madurai, Rameswaram, Tirunelveli and Trivandrum, Sri Raghavendra came to Udipi, where he surrendered himself completely to the worship of an enchanting idol of Lord Krishna, installed by Sri Madhwacharya, the founder of the dualistic school of philosophy. He made a small gold image of Sri Venugopala for his personal worship, and this was added to the collection of idols in the pantheon of the Mutt.

During his stay in Udipi, he wrote a gloss for Vyasaraya's *Chandrika*, as well as *Nyaya Muktavali*, another annotative text.

From Udipi, the saint proceeded to Mysore. The ruler of Mysore received him with State honours at Nanjangodu, a place hallowed by the visits of the Swami's predecessors, Vibhutendra and Vijayendra (it was in this town that Sri Raghavendra established his Mutt). Later, he moved on to Srirangapattinam, the then capital of Mysore, for Chaturmasya Vrata. The rainy season over, Raghavendra proceeded northwards. Near Kadag, he readily acceded to a village headman's request to honour him with a visit to his humble abode.

In honour of the saint's visit to his house, the headman arranged for an elaborate feast. As it was the mango season, mango *sambar* had been prepared in large quantities and was kept in huge vessels. His younger son, who was playing nearby, accidentally fell into one of the vessels and was drowned. The bereaved parents, unwill-

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ing to mar the occasion, decided to suppress the news of the tragedy, but the fact was soon known to the guests who raised a hue and cry.

When the saint arrived, he already knew, through his mystic powers, what had happened. But pretending no knowledge of the tragedy he asked for their children. The headman had to reveal the truth. The saint commiserated with him and asked for the body to be brought before him. He then sprinkled holy water on it — and the boy instantly woke, as if from a deep slumber, and ran towards his playmates. The gathering marvelled at the miracle and fell at the saint's feet.

The news that Sri Raghavendra had revived the dead spread far and wide. People, irrespective of their religion and sect, came to admire him and became his ardent devotees. Some fanatics, however, envious of his reputation and fearing that the Madhwa philosophy and Hari *bhakthi* would attract large masses of people, decided to weaken the impact he had created. They hatched a conspiracy to demonstrate that he did not possess mystic or tantric powers.

Learning that the saint would pass their way shortly, they got a young boy to lie flat on the ground and hold his breath, pretending he was dead. They then covered his body with a cloth and sat round him, weeping. When the palanquin bringing Raghavendra neared the spot, they stopped it and pleaded with him to restore the boy to them. The saint saw through their game and realising that their purpose was only to test his yogic powers, told them, "I am sorry I will not be able to help you. I can only revive persons who die in accidents, not those who die of

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natural causes. Your boy has died naturally. Kindly move the body from my path and allow me to proceed."

When they heard these words, the conspirators laughed sarcastically and said, "Away with your powers. There is no need to carry away the body. The boy is not dead. You will see him rise and run." But when they called to the boy, he would not get up. They shook his body in vain. He would not even open his eyes. To their great bewilderment, they found he had ceased breathing, and his pulse had collapsed. He was really dead. Realising the folly of putting to test the saint's powers, they fled in tears.

It was now mid-summer. The wife of a disciple in the saint's entourage suddenly got her birthpangs. No shady abode was in sight, and there was not a drop of water to drink. The saint turned the spot into a cool garden and threw his upper cloth in the air. It came down as a tent. He sprinkled water on the ground and made a hole with his *danda* (holy staff). The spot became a pool of water. Having performed these miracles, the saint continued on his journey. The woman stayed back and joined the camp after a safe delivery and the necessary rest.

Performing many such miracles on the way, Sri Raghavendra reached Pandharpur in Maharashtra and worshipped in the temple of Sri Vitthobanatha. Later he moved to Adoni near Raichur.

While passing through a hamlet, he saw a poor young Brahmin seated under a peepul tree, grazing cattle. His name was Venkanna; he was illiterate and his parents had given him up as an idiot. When Venkanna saw Raghavendra Swami pass by, he stood up and bowed to him reverentially. The saint blessed him and gave him *prasad*. Venkanna made bold to relate his pitiable plight

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to him. The saint took pity on him and uttered a few words of consolation and comfort.

"Venkanna, have no worry, a bright future awaits you. Whenever you are in trouble, think of me. I will rush to your rescue," Raghavendra told him benevolently before going on to Srisailam in Andhra Pradesh, where he worshipped Sri Mallikarjuna and Brahmarambika. From there, he proceeded to Tirupati, the abode of his *kuladeiva*, Sri Venkatachalapathi. And then he visited Kanchipuram and Tiruvannamalai. From there, after passing through Koilur and Vriddhachalam, he arrived at Sri Mushnam, a holy place in South Arcot.

Sri Madhwacharya had visited this place and worshipped Sri Bhuvaraha Perumal, a *swayambhumurthi* (a self-created idol). He had dug a big tank there with his holy staff. Many Madhwa monks had visited this holy place. Sri Raghavendra, following in the footsteps of his predecessors, came to Srimushnam, took a dip in the sacred tank, offered prayers to Bhuvarahar and performed his pooja. From here, he returned to Kumbakonam, where he was welcomed jubilantly by his devotees.

* * *

One day, while teaching his disciples, he suddenly turned his face towards the sky and raised his joined palms in prayer. The next moment, a garland of *thulasi* beads fell around his neck.

His astounded students raised their eye to the skies and there they saw a saintly personage, thrice waving two fingers in a V-shape. The students were anxious to know the significance of this rare sight and Sri Raghavendra explained:

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"I bowed to Sri Krishnadvaipayana Theertha, who after his death is being carried in a *vimana* to the celestial world by the *devas*. He blessed me and presented me this *thulasi mala*. Then, to remind me that my end is nearing, he showed two fingers, three times. That means that only two years, two months, two days are left for me to enter *Brindavanam* (attain *samadhi*). This is an indication that I must now move to an already selected place where my body is to be entombed and I will have to spend the rest of my days there."

He now started concentrating on the preparations to be made for his departure. He appointed a priest to look after the daily pooja of the *Brindavanam* of his guru's guru, Sri Vijayendra Swamigal. He also nominated a successor to look after the affairs of the Mutt. He then worked out the details of his journey. But the citizens of Kumbakonam could not reconcile themselves to his leaving the town once and for all. They pleaded with the saint to stay back, but the Swami convinced them that he had to be elsewhere in the evening of his life and fixed an auspicious day to leave Kumbakonam. As the hour of departure approached, the whole town was in tears, just as Ayodhya was a picture of gloom when Sri Ramachandra left for the forest.

Sri Raghavendra travelled fast. He went to Karnataka and after visiting Hospet and Nava Brindavanam — where nine great Madhwa saints are interred — he arrived at Adoni, near Raichur. Venkanna Bhatta, the Dewan of the place, arranged for a tumultuous welcome to the saint. Yes, the same Venkanna, the orphan who had once been blessed by the saint, had now become the Dewan. How that poor Brahmin boy rose to that position of eminence

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only demonstrates that fate becomes powerless if a person has the grace of a guru. From the moment Venkanna had the *darshan* of the saint, he joined the path of progress and success.

* * *

Some months after Raghavendra had assured Venkanna that he would come to his rescue if he thought of him in moments of trouble, Venkanna faced a perplexing situation.

The Nawab of Adoni, Masood Khan, came to Venkanna's village for revenue collection. There, he received a message from the Emperor in distant Delhi. There was no one nearby to read it to him. He saw Venkanna standing in a corner and, beckoning him to come near, gave him the letter and asked him to read the contents.

Venkanna was nonplussed. He had but poor schooling, and the letter was beyond his ability. He perspired and he trembled as the impatient Nawab shouted, "Be quick. My time is precious."

Venkanna opened the letter. It was written in Hindustani. He could not make anything of it. "Will you read it or not?" roared the Nawab. "If you explain the contents, I shall reward you liberally. But if you fail, be prepared to lose your head," he thundered. Venkanna was in a dilemma. As he trembled in distress, he murmured, *"Om Sri Raghavendraya namaha"* (Glory to the holy name of Sri Raghavendra).

Venkanna kept repeating the saint's sacred name. It echoed and reverberated in the innermost recesses of his heart and then there was a sudden light within and the

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thick veil of darkness disappeared. Wisdom dawned, and ignorance melted away.

Once again he looked at the epistle, but now the script was intelligible and the meaning clear. Without hesitation or break, he read it out in a bold and sonorous voice. But how he did it was a puzzle to himself!

The Nawab gave him a patronising pat and pleased with the happy tidings of more territories having been annexed to his domains, he said, "Venkanna, today I appoint you my Dewan. There cannot be another person better suited to advise me in state matters."

Venkanna, struggling to eke out a living, suddenly found himself elevated to a position of power. But though his social position changed, he never forgot his guru, Sri Raghavendra. He longed to see him again. And as if to fulfil his desire, the saint came to Adoni in search of a suitable site for his *Brindavanam*. Hearing the happy news, Venkanna rushed towards the border and received the guru with full honours.

* * *

At a public function held to celebrate his visit, Raghavendra expressed his immense joy at finding Venkanna in such high office.

Venkanna bowed in all humility and said in a tremulous voice, "It is all due to your boundless grace. I have surrendered unto you completely. Order me to do your bidding and it will be done."

"I shall avail myself of your good offices when the necessity arises," replied the saint, gave him *prasad* and prepared to journey on.

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Dewan Venkanna had meanwhile spoken to the Nawab of the immeasurable qualities of the head and the heart of Raghavendra. The Nawab, who had already heard about the honours showered on the saint by the Sultan of Bijapur, was anxious to meet the eminent sage. When he expressed his wish to the Dewan, Venkanna arranged for a private audience with his guru.

Nawab Majid Khan left to meet Raghavendra, but was determined to test the saint's spiritual powers. He ordered his servants to carry a gold plate full of mutton, covered with a silk cloth. As soon as he approached Raghavendra, the Nawab placed the gold plate in front of him as an offering and, after paying his respects in the Islamic style, sat down. The saint blessed him and enquired about his administration and the welfare of the citizens. The Nawab sat completely smitten by the divine lustre emitting from the saint's face. The grace that emanated from the latter's eyes was like the cool rays of the moon that soothe the mind and the body. The smile that played on his lips filled the Nawab's heart. His conscience pricked him for having stooped so low as to test this divine person. He was ashamed of himself.

While the Nawab was undergoing this mental torture, the saint sprinkled holy water on the piece of cloth covering the plate and asked one of his attendants to remove the cloth.

The Nawab wanted to shout, "Please, please, don't remove it. I have committed a heinous crime." But he felt a lump in his throat which prevented him from uttering the words.

The attendant removed the cloth, and, lo, there was no mutton on the plate. Instead, there were fruits and flowers!

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The Nawab rubbed his eyes in disbelief. "Oh, what a miracle! What mystic powers! I have behaved like a child before this mighty personage," he thought and ran to the saint, fell at his feet and wept. Raghavendra blessed him and the unbeliever turned into a devotee. The Nawab came to scoff but remained to pray!

The Nawab decided to donate a village to the saint as a token of his gratitude for giving him spiritual solace. He expressed his wish to the Dewan, who in turn conveyed this to his guru. The saint was overwhelmed with joy and said, "Venkanna, tell the Nawab that I am pleased to accept his present. I need the village Mantralaya on the banks of the Tungabhadra. Kindly arrange to transfer it to the Mutt!"

Dewan Venkanna hesitated for a moment. "Sir, please don't ask for that village. It is barren land. Moreover, it has already been donated to someone else. I shall arrange to give you a fertile place." Venkanna pleaded in vain. "Venkanna, I have special reasons to ask for this particular village. I intend to settle down there. I have come all the way from Kumbakonam. Why should I, a sanyasi, need fertile land? Like my predecessors, I too am desirous of having my final resting place on the banks of a river. Once you promised me help when needed. The hour has come." Venkanna could not say 'no'.

And so it came about that Mantralaya became Sri Raghavendra's village. On an auspicious day, the saint arrived there. His first act was to build a temple for his family deity, Sri Venkatachalapathi, the Lord of the Seven Hills.

Venkanna visited the saint almost daily and looked after his comforts. One day, the saint took the Dewan to

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the river bank and showed him the exact place where he had decided to have his *Brindavanam* built. Venkanna, following the directions of his guru, had a masonry chamber built on the spot and erected a wall all around it. He also constructed dwellings for the 60 Brahmins who were to perform the daily pooja for the *Brindavanam*.

The saint then ordained Sri Venkannacharya, the grandson of his *poorvasrama* brother Gururajacharya, as the next pontiff of the Mutt. He was given the name Yogendra Theertha, and the Dewan was asked to look after his needs and conveniences. Venkanna arranged to transfer the documents in the name of the new pontiff.

The news that Raghavendra would be entering *Brindavanam* soon spread among his devotees who flocked to Mantralaya in their thousands. One day the saint asked Venkanna to come close to him, and whispered in his ear that the final hour was fast approaching. He comforted him saying, "Venkanna, don't lose heart. I shall never desert you. Even after leaving these mortal coils, I shall continue to guide you from my *Brindavanam*."

Venkanna, in tears, stood in stoic silence. Those who rushed to Mantralaya, to have a last *darshan* of the Saint, wished to stay by him round the clock. He sat there like a statue, a picture of mental poise and abiding peace, blessing the devotees that stood around him. Speechless, with their folded hands trembling, their hearts throbbing, they fixed their eyes on the golden frame of the saint emitting rays of divine lustre.

His thoughts had already established communion with the Creator and, as one who had conquered death, he was in a state of supreme bliss.

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Being engrossed in the activities of the material world, which is but fleeting in nature, and given to attachment and affection in our earthly existence, we are always afraid of approaching death. In our last moments, the pangs of separation torment us. But for great men of wisdom, who are unattached, there is no sense of separation at all. They never feel that they are parting company with someone nor do they worry that they are leaving their possessions behind. On the contrary, they are blessed with the bliss of reunion rather than affected by the pangs of separation.

For godmen like Raghavendra, death is not a full stop to living. It is but a continuation of 'life' in a different form and state. Succumbing to Nature's unfailing law, they shed the physical body and continue a 'bodyless' existence. It is a yogic feat *par excellence.*

The appointed day for Raghavendra to shed his mortal coils drew near. He knew beforehand the exact date and time of his departure and announced it casually as an ordinary mortal would a tour programme. He called Venkanna and told him that he would enter the chamber on Thursday the second day of the month of *Sravana,* in Krishna Paksha (the dark half of the month). The Dewan then began to organise all the rituals and ceremonies connected with the *Brindavana pravesa.*

The day dawned and, before the sun rose, all Mantralaya was awake. None had slept. How could anyone? At dawn, they bathed in the river, donned fresh clothes and congregated where the saint sat in majestic silence.

"Is it possible to live after the Master is no more?" they silently worried. The Master was quick to understand the dejection and despondency writ large in their

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faces. He soothed their troubled minds with a benign glance. With eloquent silence he taught them the path of wisdom and instilled in them the courage to face reality.

The saint then performed his usual personal pooja. The idols of Sri Rama, Digvijaya Rama, Jayarama, Vasudeva, and Venugopala shone with a rare and divine lustre and Raghavendra was moved to tears on seeing them. That moving spectacle touched the hearts of his devotees.

Sri Raghavendra was suddenly inspired by the song celestial and was gripped by an ecstatic experience. At his instance, a *veena* was brought to him. He adjusted the strings, set the tune, and subdued music flowed from Krishna's flute. A prayer song was born.

> *Oh, Mukunda, reveal thy divine feet to me today. Son of Nandagopa, a source of joy in Gokula, I am irretrievably caught in the net of worldly attachments and I am at a loss to find a way out...*

So proceeded the song as he poured out his heart.

Music and *bhakthi* coalesced in perfect harmony, and the resultant song in its pristine purity filled the hall. It reverberated and verily reached the heavens. A sweet scent filled the air. Innumerable flowers rained from above. The temple bells tolled, followed by the jingling sound of anklets.

The next moment, everyone saw the idol of Venugopala Murthi dancing in great ecstasy under the influence of the saint's deep and sincere devotion. Those who saw this kept time in perfect rhythm and were bathed in their own tears of joy.

As the appointed hour neared, Raghavendra summoned the learned scholars and asked them to read the commen-

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taries he had written on Sri Madhwacharya's works. In one corner sat the Vedic pundits chanting Veda mantras without a break. All Mantralaya was under the spell of the incantations.

Blessing everyone in silence, the saint slowly walked up to the *Brindavanam*. He had the chamber purified with incense and camphor. There was a great bustle in the crowd and the devotees jostled one another. Some closed their eyes and shouted 'Hare Narayana', 'Krishna', 'Venugopala', 'Sri Rama'. Some just mumbled 'Hail Sri Raghavendra' with their eyes fixed on the saint.

Sri Raghavendra walked with majestic steps. His lips, on which a serene smile danced, chanted the Lord's name incessantly. Tears of joy rolled down his rosy cheeks as, with the holy staff held gracefully, he stepped into the chamber. The *nadaswaram* poured out auspicious songs. The Master was heard to utter 'Om Narayana' as he sat in the *Padmasana* posture. As instructed by their guru, the disciples began closing the chamber with Salagrama stones. The golden frame of the saint gradually became hidden from everyone's view. As his physical body disappeared, a spiritual force filled the universe. Even today, it is a live force, blessing the true devotee and performing innumerable miracles.

Appannachariar was an important disciple of Sri Raghavendra. He was on the other side of the Tungabhadra when the Master entered his *Brindavanam*. When he heard about the *Jeeva Samadhi* of his Master, he suffered great mental agony. "I am a sinner because I was denied the good fortune of having his *darshan* before he entered into the sacred chamber," he cried and hastened to have a glimpse of the structure at least.

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Though no poet, he found himself pouring out hymns in praise of his Master. They are known as *Sri Raghavendra Stotra Mala* (garland of praises) and are sung devotedly by his followers.

It is said that when Appannachariar was struggling for words to compose the last line of a particular stanza, Sri Raghavendra came to his rescue. Quick came the sweet voice of the Master from the chamber uttering the few words needed to complete it. Appannachariar was convinced that, though he was unseen, he was very much there.

Everyone who goes to Mantralaya is reassured by this confidence and faith.

* * *

Before we left Mantralaya, we had a last *darshan* at the *Brindavanam*. It was only with great effort that we could get away from the place.

We met the manager and took leave of him. The manager would not accept my thanks. "Here, everything happens by the grace of Sri Raghavendra. You will have his blessings in abundant measure. He is not only a pontiff, but a great *jnani*, a man of rare wisdom and a realised soul. He has unique mystic powers. He is a matchless saint: nay, he is a God in human form. He has countless miracles to his credit. There is no disease which cannot be cured by his benign grace. He is a Kalpatharu (the heavenly tree, when dispelling our miseries) and a Kamadhenu (the divine cow, when answering our prayers)."

The manager then recounted one or two instances where Raghavendra had come to the rescue of his devotees, irrespective of their religion or birth.

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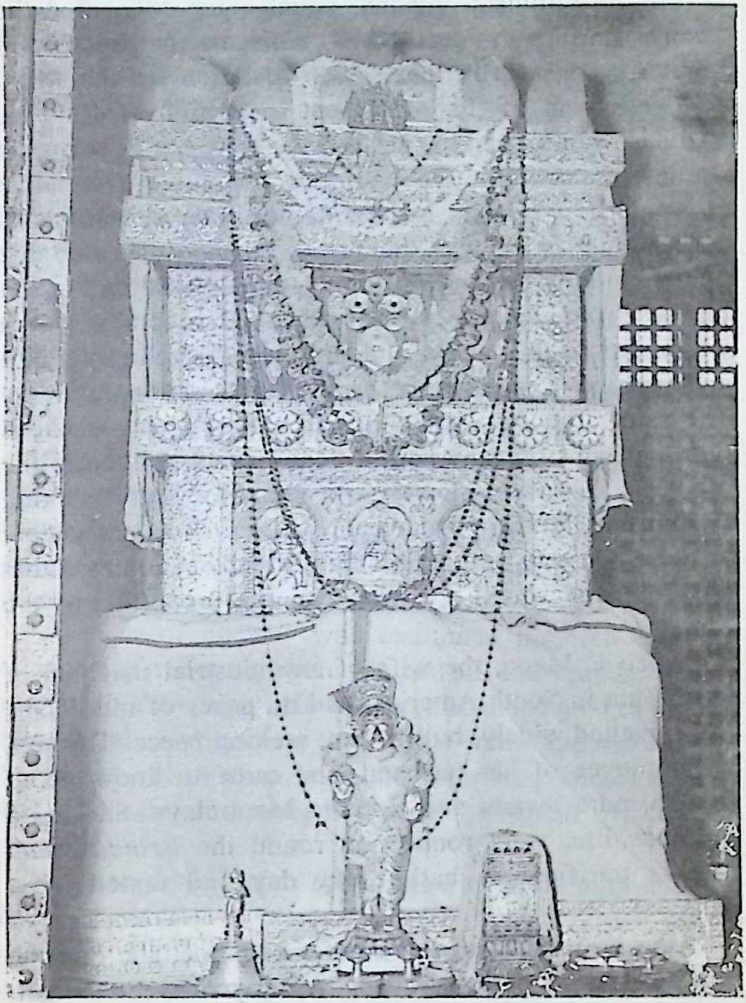

The samadhi *of Sri Raghavendra Swamigal, the Saint of Mantralaya*

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The East India Company, which once controlled the Madras Presidency, decided to confiscate the property in Mantralaya given by the Nawab of Adoni to the Mutt. The followers of the Mutt sent a petition to Madras. Thomas Munro, then the head of the Revenue Department (he later became the Governor), was deputed to conduct an enquiry. When he arrived at Mantralaya, pious and god-fearing as he was, he removed his shoes and hat before entering the *Brindavanam* temple. Standing in front of the *Brindavanam*, he was absorbed in prayer for a while. Sri Raghavendra suddenly appeared before him and they both engaged in serious conversation for long. The saint argued with the British officer and convinced him that the Company had no legal rights to acquire the property. Those who stood nearby could see Munro talking to someone, but Sri Raghavendra's figure was not visible to them. On returning to Madras, Munro announced that the Company would not take over the properties of the Mutt.

Volco C Mego, the wife of an industrial magnate of Venezeula in South America, had no peace of mind. She had travelled widely, but in vain, seeking peace. Through an employee of her husband, she came to know about Raghavendra Swami and came to Mantralaya. She led a religious life, went round and round the *Brindavanam* after a purificatory bath every day and fasted most days.

After two weeks of this rigorous routine, she met the pontifical head of the Mutt, Sri Sujayendra Swamigal, who enquired about the present state of her mind. She said she was enjoying peace and calm hitherto denied her. She recalled that even in The Vatican, she had not had

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such tranquillity of mind. She was able to feel the divine force that resided in the *Brindavanam*, but could not express its efficacy in so many words. She finally narrated an incident which occurred near the *Brindavanam* on the last day of her visit.

When she was going round the *Brindavanam*, Sri Raghavendra appeared before her. He had gold coins and jewellery in his hands and offered them to her. She emotionally burst out, "Swami, I am not in need of money, nor diamonds. I do not want such mundane things. I need internal peace. Everlasting joy must fill my heart. Grant me such a boon and bless me." The Master smiled, raised his right hand, blessed her and disappeared.

Anvari Madhava Rao, a former Member of Parliament, had gone to New York on some urgent business. While there, he suddenly felt an unbearable pain in his chest, struggled for a while and fell unconscious. He was admitted to a hospital by his friends.

A team of doctors who examined him felt that his chances of recovery were almost nil and that he would not survive the night. He was kept in an isolated room. He thought about his guru Sri Raghavendra and prayed for his grace. Within an hour, he recovered consciousness and, the next moment, he heard the sound of wooden sandals.

An ascetic in ochre robes came towards him, and sat by his bedside.

"May I know who you are?" asked Rao.

"Don't you recognise me? I am Raghavendra. I have come from Mantralaya having heard your fervent prayers. You need not worry unnecessarily. I shall be with you till you get well and return to India. Before midnight your

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chest pain will subside and your temperature will come down. Before dawn you will recover completely," said the saint affectionately.

At four in the morning, the doctors came to examine their patient and were bewildered to find his state normal.

In the morning, when Madhava Rao opened his eyes after a sound sleep, he saw several doctors standing near him. "Why do you stare at me so?" he asked them.

"We cannot believe that you are alive. Did anyone attend on you during the night and give you any treatment?" asked one of the doctors.

"Yes, my Master, Raghavendra Swami, came to me. He rubbed me gently from head to foot three times. He assured me that I would be alright before daybreak and that I need have no worry about my health," said Rao, bubbling with joy.

This incident is recorded in the hospital register under the title 'The wonder treatment given by Saint Raghavendra Swami'.

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Baba of Shirdi

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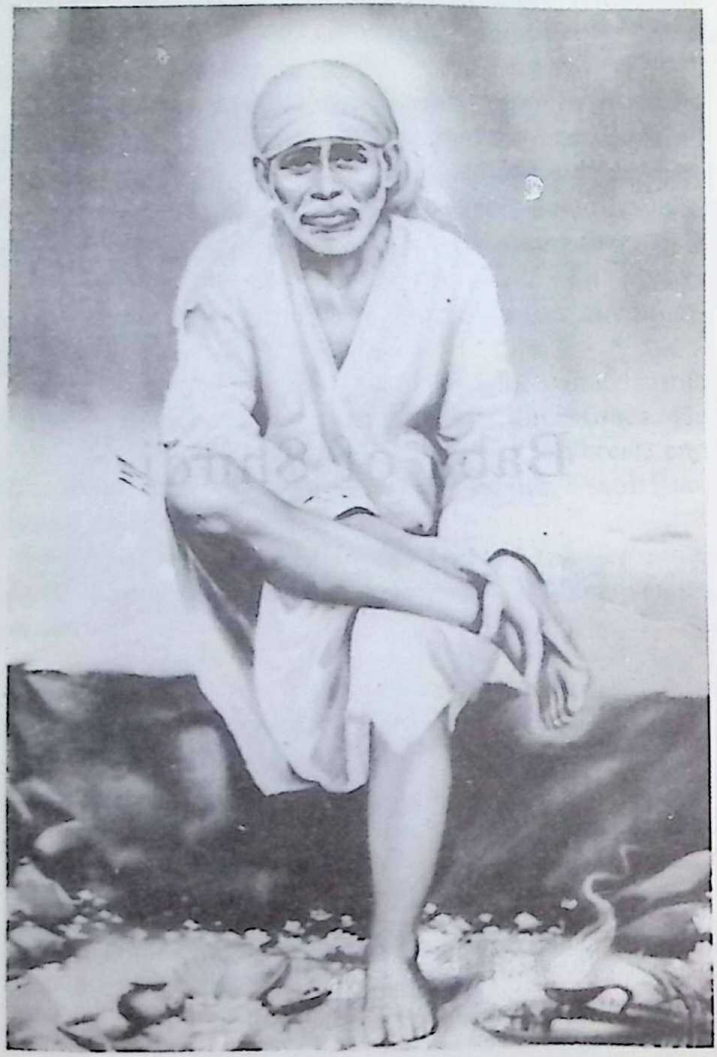

Baba of Shirdi

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Our train steamed into Kopargaon station, reached by a line which branches from the Raichur-Bombay line. S.S. peeped through the window and exclaimed, "Yes, he has come to receive us in spite of the hot weather. How nice of him!"

"Who is he?" I enquired.

"He is Mr.Rege. He had been with Sri Sai Baba for over eight years. He is a retired High Court Judge, nearly eighty years old. See how hale he is! He has come all the way from Indore just to receive us. We are really lucky to have his company for three days at Shirdi," replied S.S.

The train halted at the platform.

Sadguru Sainath Maharajki Jai!
Rege Maharajki Jai!

An emotional chorus rent the air from our compartment.

The members of our party got down and surrounded Rege. Some touched his feet in reverence, others embraced him. He posed for photographs with some. In his own gentle way he exchanged a few pleasantries with those present. He spoke in both English and Hindi. Every-

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one seemed to be bubbling with joy, like little children seeing their mother after a temporary separation.

Rege's daughter Shanta was also there. Beaming, she was moving about exchanging a word or two with everyone.

In their enthusiasm and fluster the leaders of the party forgot to introduce me to Rege to whom I was a perfect stranger. So, I watched him from a distance. His personality and demeanour impressed me greatly.

After a hearty lunch in the compartment, the party prepared to leave for Shirdi by bus. My friends and I took our leave of them and left for Nasik by taxi.

The next day, we returned to Shirdi after a visit to Nasik and Trimbakeshwar. It was nearly 4.30 p.m. Lalji, the organiser of the tour, came to our room as soon as we arrived and urged us to hurry for our baths. "Be quick, or else you will not get a bucket; there is a heavy rush."

"Bucket! What do you mean?" I asked in wonder.

"Yes, you must stand in the queue to get a ticket for a bucket... just five paise only... If you need hot water, you must buy a separate ten paise ticket. You had better hurry and take some change with you," said Lalji, literally chasing us out.

We joined the queue, bought tickets for the bucket and hot water and, after a hurried bath, returned to our room to get dressed. We then went in search of coffee.

On our way to the Sai Mandir, we saw a number of stalls whose display of a variety of colourful, floral garlands attracted our attention. Ardent devotees were purchasing garlands and sweets from the stalls and rushing into the Sai Mandir. Their earnestness and devotion were infectious.

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Suddenly a crowded bus pulled up near us. More than fifty men and women leapt from it with a great cry of joy. The majority of them were dressed in ultra-modern clothes. Several held transistors, cameras and vanity bags in their hands. I was not certain if they were Marathis, Gujaratis or Parsis. They spoke a language quite alien to me. They did not strike me as being particularly devout persons who had come to pray. They looked more like a picnic party.

A limousine which looked like a huge boat then drew up. Prosperous-looking men and women got down from it and walked unhurriedly to the Samasthan office.

We had to pass through the central hall of the Mandir to reach the restaurant, owned by Mani Iyer from Tirunelveli District in Tamil Nadu. Some of the members of our party were already there, waiting patiently for their favourite dishes which were in great demand — *dosai, idli, vadai, uppuma* etc. The stock was running out, but due to the kind attention of Mrs.Mani Iyer we managed to get something to eat. After a hasty sip of coffee, we reached the Sai Mandir. The rest of our party had just then finished their *bhajan* session and was leaving the hall. It was nearly 7.30 p.m.

At the entrance of the front hall, there was a small Nandi, the divine bull which is the vehicle of Lord Siva. The hall, though not very spacious, had a shiny and smooth mosaic and marble floor in exquisite taste. The sweet smell of incense filled the air. The walls all round were adorned by portraits of prominent Sai *bhakthas*.

Next to the hall was the sanctum sanctorum, where Sri Sai Baba's mortal remains had been laid to rest and a marble structure erected over the *samadhi*. Garlands from

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devotees were heaped over it to a height of three feet. Beyond the *samadhi*, a large marble statue of Baba drew our attention.

The saint was seated on a golden throne, giving audience with the majesty of an imperial sovereign. A silken shawl covered his body, a crown with rare gems set in it adorned his head, his eyes shed rays of lustrous light while a benign smile brightened his visage. The grand spectacle of this statue proclaimed how a poor fakir had reigned as the supreme monarch of a spiritual empire.

Arathi was performed in grand style and scale. Liveried bodyguards stood to attention on both sides, with silver canes in their hands. Devotees lined up on either side, with the holy name 'Sai Ram' on their lips. The entire gathering was lost in noble thought of Baba, immersing their individuality in the flood of his limitless grace. When the priest sang in praise of Baba, with the camphor-lit plate in hand, the concourse of people joined him in chorus.

Arathi gnana raja, maha kaivalya theja
Sevithee sadhusanda, mun uvekala maja

The 'picnic party' was present here too, but they were now singing in ecstasy, with eyes closed in prayer. "Baba indeed casts a mighty spell on everyone," I reflected.

It was nine. The colour portrait kept near the *samadhi* was brought out and placed in a tiny palanquin called a *palki*. The chappals, clothes and walking stick used by Baba were placed by the side of the portrait. The *palki* was then taken in procession to the beating of drums and the singing of *bhajans*.

The *palki* was first taken to the nearby 'Dwarak Mayi', once a mosque, where Baba used to give *darshan* to his

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devotees. It was then taken to a nearby building known as the 'Chawadi'. I was told by Chari, one of our party, that Baba used to sit on the *pyal* of the Chawadi, giving *darshan* to devotees, and comforting the afflicted with soothing words. Some nights he would rest there.

Baba's portrait was placed inside the Chawadi and offerings were made, pooja performed. A while later, the portrait was taken back in procession to the Mandir. This procession is a 'must' on Thursdays and on every festival day.

At ten, *Sayanarathi* was performed before Baba's statue, the final act before the curtains were drawn for the day. Baba retired for the day and was left alone. His body was covered with shawls and perfume sprinkled. A silken shawl was spread with reverence over the *samadhi*. Near it, milk and water to drink were kept in silver vessels. Finally, a mosquito net was thrown around the statue. In short, a bedroom atmosphere was created with such great care and devotion that even persons who knew nothing of Baba were thrilled and inspired.

Sri Samartha Sadguru Sainath Maharaj had retired for the day. Suddenly a reverential silence enveloped the entire hall. Those who talked, did so in undertones and in whispers. The hall soon emptied but for a few who sat in a corner silently meditating. In that *samadhi mandir*, I experienced the austere atmosphere that prevails in an ashram, the noisy exuberance characteristic of a *bhajana* hall, and the traditional routine followed in a Hindu temple.

We too retired to our room. But I could not sleep. My mind was full of Sai Baba. I was eager to learn in detail how Baba, the great Master who had endeared himself to lakhs of people, had lived and moved about. You may

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read about his daily routine, the miracles he performed and the personal experiences of his devotees, but to hear of them from his own disciple, who had seen him in flesh and blood and moved closely with him, was to know Sai Baba on a different level. Eager for the experience, I left the room to meet Rege.

As I entered the room where Rege was staying, I was surprised to find a large gathering. Around him were his ardent admirers, waiting eagerly to hear whatever he chose to utter.

Just then, Rege's daughter, Shanta, said something in Hindi to her father, who then asked Sanjeevi Anna to sing a song. Shanta had enjoyed Sanjeevi's performance at the Mandir in the evening and she wanted her father to share her joy.

Sanjeevi Anna stood up and rendered a *bhajan* in Hindi. Rege, who watched him with rapt attention and sincere appreciation, suddenly stood up, walked up to him, embraced him, and started singing and dancing himself. He no more looked like a man of eighty; I saw the innocent enthusiasm of an eight-year-old in his face!

Slowly the crowd started thinning and my old friend Kesava Rao introduced me to Rege. I bowed in humble salutation. With a broad smile, he patted me on my back and asked me to sit close to him. Shanta gave her father a tablet, which he swallowed without protest.

"She is my daughter. These are my relatives. They have accompanied me to take care of me in accordance with the doctor's advice. They don't approve of my keeping late hours, but when so many kind souls visit me, how can I sleep?" he asked with a laugh.

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I smiled back and said, "I don't know much about Baba. I am keen to hear about him from you who knew him".

He must have obliged hundreds who had expressed a similar wish before. But Rege did not betray the slightest feeling of boredom, nor did he hesitate to narrate his experiences to me. In his mellifluous, measured tones, I heard the voice of Truth. When in chaste, simple English, he described many incidents in vivid detail, I was transported to a bygone age.

* * *

Rege was born in a Brahmin family known for its learning, godliness and religiosity. The Goddess enshrined in the Durga temple of Goa is his family deity. Being initiated when young, he duly discharged the daily obligations assigned to a Brahmin youth. One day, he was suddenly attracted by a picture of Dhruva-Narayana, painted by Ravi Varma of Kerala. In the picture, which hung in his bedroom, the scene of Lord Narayanamurthi giving *darshan* to the child-devotee Dhruva was depicted. Young Rege was so absorbed with it that he would fancy himself to be Dhruva and yearn for the grace of the Lord of Vaikuntha. He went to the extent of cutting out the figure of Dhruva from the picture and, imagining himself to be in Dhruva's place, he would lose himself in deep meditation and inwardly chant the Lord's name.

It was 1910 and Rege, a youth of 21, was in college. One night, he had three dreams in quick succession.

In the first dream, while his body lay still on the cot, he stood a little distance away. Near him, the four-armed Lord Narayana stood in exactly the same posture as he

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appeared in the picture on the wall. In the second dream, he saw an old sadhu standing near Lord Narayana, who pointed out the sadhu to Rege saying, "He is Sai Baba of Shirdi. Accept him as your guru." The Lord then disappeared.

In the third dream, Rege was flying in the sky with the help of celestial beings. After a strenuous flight, he landed in a hamlet. From enquiries, he learned that it was 'Shirdi'. There, in a mosque, he saw an aged fakir seated in a corner. Rege was startled to see the very same sadhu to whom Lord Narayana had introduced him in his earlier dream. Rege went near the sadhu, who appeared as love incarnate as he sat with his legs stretched in relaxation, and bowed in surrender, his head touching Baba's feet.

Baba exclaimed, "Have you come to have my *darshan*? It is not fair, I must have your *darshan*." So saying, he fell prostrate on the ground, his head touching Rege's feet.

After the dream, Sai Baba became an obsession with Rege. He was impatient to see him in flesh and blood. And very soon his desire was fulfilled. One day, he arrived in Shirdi. When he entered the mosque, there was a big congregation in front of Baba. With easy familiarity he fell before Baba and, as it had happened in his dream, Rege's head touched the holy man's feet. Baba as quickly drew back his leg and said in mock irritation, "Why do you bow before an ordinary mortal like me?"

Rege, who had come with great enthusiasm and fervour, was completely downcast because he felt Baba had slighted him.

Being a modern youth given to rationalistic ideas, Rege was once averse to man worshipping man. "Is Baba

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reminding me of those views of mine?" he wondered. But though upset, Rege was determined.

"Lord Maha Vishnu Himself has ordained in my dream that I must choose Baba as my guru," he mused. "Come what may, I shall not move from this place until Baba adopts me as his disciple," Rege decided and sat in a corner with iron determination.

It was noon. The devotees had all left and Baba was seated alone. Nobody dared to disturb Baba in such moments of silence and solitude. Rege disregarded the practice and walked upto him. Baba received him with outstretched arms and murmured, "Come near, my child". His eyes glittered and a sweet smile blossomed on his lips.

Encouraged by this unexpected gesture, Rege fell at Baba's feet once again. Baba lifted him in both hands and, with a warm embrace, said, "You are my child. When outsiders come, don't we drive away our children?"

Rege's joy knew no bounds and he shook with ecstasy. The guru had accepted him with love, the slave had found his refuge at last.

As he talked, Rege consistently referred to Baba as 'my Master'. His pride and joy were contagious and my own faith in Baba grew as I listened to Rege.

To Rege, though the body called Baba had disappeared, Baba the light had not vanished. He felt that the light had merged with him and shone through his speech, thought, action and breath. His soul and the universal soul called Baba were not different but one and the same.

Rege, who had no doubt that Baba dwelt in him and functioned through him, narrated another unforgettable incident.

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Once, Baba hugged Rege and offered lovingly, "Ask me any boon. I will grant it to you".

Rege was quick to reply "I need nothing, Baba", but Baba insisted. "Tell me, do you want money or valuables? Or are you interested in a position of power or status in society? What do you long for in this world? Be frank with me, my child. I shall give you whatever you desire."

"The mother knows what the child wants," said Rege with moist eyes.

Baba pleaded with Rege, "Please ask for something. I am here to oblige you."

"Will you give me anything?"

"Oh, yes, anything you ask for."

"Then I will tell you what I wish for. Promise me that you will be with me in this birth and in the births to come. I need nothing else, Baba."

"All right, let it be as you wish. I will not desert you. I will be with you, within you, wherever you are and whatever you do," Baba promised.

Rege then described an incident to illustrate how Baba kept his word.

In 1914, Mrs.Rege was expecting their first child. Rege, accompanied by his wife, went to Shirdi and sought Baba's blessings. Later, when the child was born, they went again to Shirdi and placed it at Baba's feet for his blessings.

Baba, who looked at the infant with pleasure, asked Rege, "Does this child belong to you or to me?"

"The question does not arise at all, Baba. When I consider myself your slave, my child naturally belongs to you." Rege wholeheartedly assured the saint.

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"If that is so, take care of the child and bring it up carefully on my behalf," said Baba in good humour.

When the child was 18 months old, it suffered an attack of pneumonia. The doctor who attended on the child assured Rege that there was no danger to life and the child rallied round. But, a few days later, it had a severe setback and became unconscious.

Seeing his child struggling for life, Rege carried it to the pooja room, placed it under the picture of Baba and, sobbing, addressed his master. "Baba, I have already told you the child belongs to you. I am surrendering it with all my heart. Take it if you wish. Being the cause of its birth, I am prepared to take responsibility for its past deeds."

Rege felt the child's body. It was ice cold. He placed his hand on the centre of its head. He felt life escaping through that point, as is commonly believed in the case of yogis and seers. Rege was convinced that his child had received salvation and attained everlasting bliss. His belief was confirmed in a couple of months. When he stood in front of Baba with a heavy heart, Baba called out to someone standing nearby and, pointing at Rege, asked the person, "Who is he?", pretending not to know Rege. Such pranks were common with Baba when he wanted to drive home a point or unravel a riddle.

The person rather naively replied, "He is Mr.Rege, who stays in Indore".

Baba laughed heartily. "No, you are wrong. He stays here," he said, placing his palm on his heart.

"Has he any children?" Baba asked.

"No, Baba, only recently he lost his first born," answered the simple man.

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Baba laughed again. "Is the child dead? No. You have not been properly informed. I will tell you what happened. That child belonged to me and I asked him to take care of it. But some time ago, he gave it back to me and said, 'Keep it yourself. I will take upon myself its past karma.' I have taken it according to his wishes and placed it here," said Baba, again pointing to his heart.

The child was no more bound by the cycle of births and deaths. Baba himself had declared so. What other proof would Rege require?

Because Rege firmly believed that Baba was still alive, we saw in the picture of his Master which he had painted for us, Baba in flesh and blood, pulsing with life and action. We felt his benign presence. His unfailing grace fell on us. His disarming smile was magnetic.

* * *

Baba's birth and childhood are still a mystery. Whenever anyone asked Baba about his parentage, place or date of birth, the only answer was an evasive smile.

Baba's biography is based on the information he seems to have passed on to Magalsapathy, his foremost disciple and follower. According to that version, Baba was born in Padri, in the old Nizami state, to a poor Brahmin couple who could ill-afford a child. As a young boy, his parents had given him to a Muslim family. Baba used to refer to himself quite often as 'a poor Brahmin'.

Rege stated that whenever Baba was asked who his guru was, he would utter the name 'Venkoosa'. There is a story behind this.

Baba's Muslim guardian died four years after Baba came under his care. Before his death, he had instructed

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his wife to send the boy to one Gopal Rao Deshmukh, a Brahmin *zamindar*. Accordingly, Baba was taken to Selu village, 160 miles east of Shirdi, and left in the safe custody of the *zamindar*.

Gopal Rao Deshmukh was an honest, god-fearing Brahmin who believed he had been Ramananda of Benares in his previous birth. At that time, Kabir, the great poet-saint, had come to him for help. An oracle had predicted that Kabir would one day come in search of Gopal Rao in this birth also. And, as it happened, within a few days of the oracle's message, young Baba was brought to his house by the widow of his Muslim friend.

Gopal Rao had the blessings and grace of Lord Venkatachalapathi of the Seven Hills in full measure. People believed that the Lord of the Seven Hills performed his miracles through Gopal Rao. Such a fortunate soul had adopted Baba as his disciple. Baba, in turn, loved him as his father, respected him as his guru and worshipped him as his God. Gopal Rao, thus, became Baba's friend, philosopher and guide.

Gopal Rao was blessed with great occult powers, including the eight great *Siddhis*. Baba had known him to perform many a wondrous miracle, including a superhuman act to save Baba from death.

Once, while their Master was engaged in some ceremonies, attended on by Baba, a few disciples who were envious of the guru's affection for Baba, decided to do away with the boy. One of the evil-minded persons threw a big stone at Baba from behind a tree. The guru saw this and, using his powers, not only stopped the flying stone, but kept it hanging in the air.

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In a trice, another stone flew menacingly towards Baba's head. The guru jumped in front of his disciple and the stone hit him on the head and blood gushed forth. Baba, unable to bear the sight, almost broke down.

Gopal Rao counselled patience and told Baba, "Don't weep, my child. My mission in life has ended. I have decided to leave this body tomorrow at 4 p.m. I am eager to transfer all my powers to you before I die. Go and fetch milk from the black cow."

Obeying his guru's command, Baba went to the milkman and asked for the black cow's milk. The milkman said "That's not possible, the black cow is not a milch cow"!

Baba reported to his guru what the milkman had said. The guru laughed aloud and said, "Ask him to bring the cow here".

The cow was brought and Gopal Rao gently ran his hand over it, from its horns to its tail, and then asked the milkman to milk it.

Wonder of wonders, the cow started yielding milk; in fact, the supply seemed endless.

When the milk was given to Gopal Rao, he made Baba drink it. This was no ordinary milk. It was the essence of the power the guru had acquired over the years. Now, for the benefit of mankind, he gave his disciple all the knowledge, divine powers, and spiritual wealth he had acquired in all his births. Lord Venkatesa, who resided in the body of Gopal Rao, had moved into the body of the young man who was destined to be venerated in future as Sai Baba. Baba must have had this episode in mind whenever he declared that Venkoosa was his guru.

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Baba had an opportunity, immediately afterwards, to put his newly acquired powers to test. The friends of the person who had thrown the stone at Baba, ran up to the guru in tears and said the culprit had fallen to the ground after his mischief and appeared dead.

"Great soul, forgive us for our foolhardiness. We are now convinced of your superior powers. Please bring our friend to life," they wept.

Gopal Rao pleaded his inability to help them. "I am not left with any more powers. Hereafter, Baba is the repository of all my powers. Beg him. He can revive the dead if he wills."

The conspirators beseeched Baba, who took a handful of sand from under the feet of his guru and threw it over the dead body. The next moment, the seemingly dead man opened his eyes, stood up, prostrated himself before the two Masters and fled with his friends.

The next day, as announced by him, Gopal Rao passed away at exactly four in the afternoon. Before he breathed his last, he summoned Baba to his side and, pointing in the western direction, murmured, "You go that way". After the obsequies were over, Baba left Selu and, after wandering about for some months, arrived in Shirdi.

* * *

The clock struck twelve. I thought it was heartless to engage Rege in further conversation. I requested him to rest, and took my leave of him. "Will you come again? Will you come tomorrow?" he asked and "Yes," I promised.

Next morning, at 4.30, Lalji woke us. He wanted us to have a quick bath and rush to the Samadhi Mandir.

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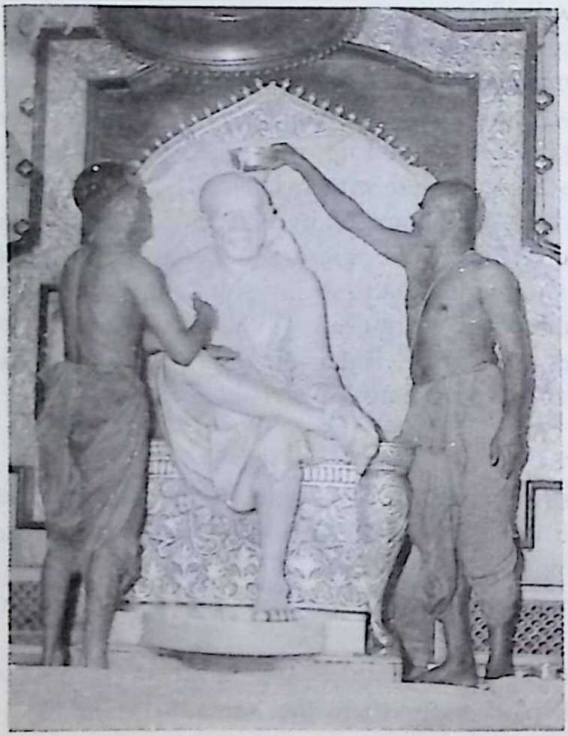
"You have come all the way from Madras to see everything. How can you afford to sleep? Don't you want to see *Thiruppalliyezhuchi* (the ritual of awakening Baba) and the *abhishekam* (the holy bath)?". We reached the Mandir just in time to see the priests remove the mosquito net and sing a hymn in praise of Baba to awaken him. Later, the shawls were removed one by one and the holy bath began. First milk, then curd and honey were poured over the statue. Next, it was bathed in hot water mixed with rosewater brought by devotees. The priest used a portion of it and returned the rest as *prasad*. The devotees



Abhishekam *being performed at the* samadhi *shrine of Baba of Shirdi*

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also took part in the *abhishekam*. After the bath, a priest dried Baba's body with Turkish towels, as he would a living person.

After *darshan* at the Mandir, we went to a small shrine called 'Khandoba'. The deity represented one aspect of Lord Siva, the destroyer among the holy Trinity. The main gate was closed and when we attempted to peep through a small hole, we could not see anything clearly as it was pitch dark inside.

When Baba arrived in Shirdi for the first time, he came to this shrine first. He must have considered the natural surroundings congenial for his meditation. But the then priest of the shrine, Magalsapathy, chased him out because he looked like a Muslim fakir. The priest seemed to fear that the stranger would defile the deity.

Baba then moved to the shade of a *neem* tree and stayed there for some time. The Samadhi Mandir is situated just behind that tree. From there we were led to a garden called 'Lendi Bagh'. A small canal runs by its side. Baba used to visit this garden every day, for his morning ablutions, after visiting the Khandoba shrine. He would stay in Lendi Bagh till 8 a.m., then return to the mosque now known as Dwaraka Mayi. It was here that Baba sat, slept and spoke to people for over fifty years.

We retraced our steps and came to the Chawadi, near the Sai Mandir. We had been there on the day of our arrival. The old structure had been partially demolished and the new one was an improvised building. I fantasised Baba sitting on the *pyal* outside, giving *darshan* to the assembled devotees.

We moved on to Dwaraka Mayi and, as soon as we entered, we saw the granite pedestal on which Baba used

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to sit. All of us were familiar with the portrait in which Baba is shown seated on a big boulder, his right leg thrown over the left. I bowed in reverence, imagining Baba's presence there.

On our left, on a raised platform, was a pit with a smouldering fire. It is a sort of oven which they call a *dhuni*. The sacred ash taken from the oven is known as *udhi* and is worn on the forehead. It is also a wonder drug for ailments, both mental and physical.

This fire is believed to have been lit by Baba himself. It is kept burning as a symbol of the torch of wisdom that Baba held aloft for the redemption of mankind. Visitors to Dwaraka Mayi have been keeping it alive with their devotion, bringing firewood with them.

Just opposite the *dhuni*, inside a decorated enclosure, a life-like portrait of Baba is kept. It is placed in the very place where Baba sat for nearly five decades. Here the mentally afflicted find solace and peace, the spiritually hungry get redress and leave satisfied.

There is a small glass bureau by the side of the huge portrait. I saw a bag of wheat inside, with flower garlands thrown over it. There is a grinding mortar very near it. They have been there since Baba's time.

"Is it the same wheat that was here fifty years ago?" I asked of a local person who accompanied us. He was noncommittal and evasive.

Once, Baba asked his rich devotees to supply large quantities of wheat, and they unhesitatingly did so. Later, Baba commanded the women to grind the entire stock into flour. They considered it a rare privilege and executed the job in no time.

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Within a month, an unprecedented famine overtook Shirdi and nearby villages. The poor people suffered for want of even gruel. Baba invited them to his shrine and distributed the wheat flour among them. It was widely believed that Baba had stocked the flour because he had foreknowledge of the impending drought and famine.

Once, the then senior Sankaracharya of Kanchi Mutt, requested some of his rich disciples to send bags of paddy to the Sankara Mutt at Rameswaram. Without questioning his intent, they sent the bags as instructed. A year passed. Suddenly a cyclone of unimaginable velocity lashed the South Indian coast. The sea became rough and menacing. Dhanushkodi, the southern tip of Rameswaram Island, was washed away. The railway bridge that connected the mainland with Rameswaram was also put out of use. The island was completely cut off from the mainland and no communication or transport was possible. Amidst all the destruction by water, the Adi Sankara Mantap alone stood without incurring the slightest damage. And the paddy stocked there was the only food for those stranded on the island for three or four days. I could not but recollect this incident when I heard about the wheat flour Baba had stocked as a precaution.

There is another story about Baba and wheat.

One day, when some women saw Baba grinding wheat in the mortar, they asked, "Baba, is this your job? Do you intend preparing *roti* for your meal?" Baba did not answer them but continued his efforts. The women summoned courage and told Baba, "Your hands will hurt. We will do it for you," and pleaded with him to leave the job to them. With much reluctance, Baba allowed them to finish the task. Later, after they had ground the entire

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stock of wheat, each of them bundled a considerable quantity of flour in her saree and started homewards.

Baba was furious. "You have no right to take it home. You had better throw it away beyond the borders of Shirdi!"

Who can disregard Baba's injunction? The women emptied the entire stock of flour beyond the village limits according to Baba's wish.

As that time, cholera was rampant in Shirdi. Baba's intention had been to drive away the scourge. What he had been grinding into flour was the demon of cholera and that is what the women threw out of Shirdi. After the incident, the epidemic gradually subsided and finally disappeared. This happened in 1910. Anna Sahib Dabholkar, Baba's biographer, mentions this episode.

* * *

From Dwaraka Mayi I went straight to Rege's quarters. He greeted me with his disarming smile.

"I hope you have seen all the places connected with Baba's life?" Rege asked.

"Yes. The more I see of his usual haunts and hear anecdotes about him, the more I am attracted to him. It is evident that he had led a noble life, full of sympathy, love and compassion. My regret at not having had the good fortune of seeing him is partially offset by meeting and talking with you. When you speak about Baba, you disappear from my view, and I only see your great Master standing before me and talking to me in the most friendly terms. Please tell me more about Baba."

Tears rolled down Rege's cheeks and, in a voice quivering with emotion, he said, "It is all due to the blessings

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of my Master. He is the director, I am the actor. He commands me to speak and I speak."

As we were talking, an old man came into the room. He must have been over seventy. His clothes were old-fashioned and dirty. A turban was awkwardly perched on his head. The cloth was bleached through overuse. His spectacles, with aluminium frames, were not fixed properly. He carried a walking stick in his hand. A white beard and a toothless mouth completed the picture.

He walked weakly towards Rege, who asked him to sit by his side. The old man took *prasad* from his pouch and gave some to Rege, who received it reverentially. Then, asking his daughter to bring him ten rupees, he gave it to the old man. Seeing me observing the stranger intently, Rege began to narrate another story.

* * *

"He is Magalsapathy, the priest of the Khandoba shrine, which you just visited. His father, the senior Magalsapathy, was the priest who drove Baba from the shrine when he first came to Shirdi. It was he who later called him 'Sai' and became his foremost devotee and disciple," reminisced Rege. And then he went on...

"As the days passed, the older Magalsapathy developed a great respect and veneration for Sai Baba and started attending on him. He gave up his profession as a goldsmith and devoted all his time and energy to the service of the Khandoba and Baba. Baba, in turn, showered limitless love and affection on Magalsapathy.

"In the initial stages, Magalsapathy was only an ardent admirer of Baba. Later, they became very close and there developed a guru-disciple relationship. Magalsapathy in-

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troduced the routine for the worship of Baba in traditional Hindu style. He would place *chandan* paste on Baba's leg, neck and forehead in that order and performed pooja with flowers. Baba did not object to it. But he did not allow anyone else to do likewise.

"One day, Baba called him and said, 'I am aware that you are heartbroken because you have lost your only son. Don't worry. Go home and sleep. You will soon be blessed with another son.' The very next year Magalsapathy's wife gave birth to a male child who later became the junior Magalsapathy. You saw him give me *prasad* just now," said Rege with a smile.

After the priest left, Rege recollected an anecdote that illustrated the late Magalsapathy's faith in Sai Baba.

"One day, in 1886, Baba summoned his foremost disciple and said, 'I am leaving this body to see God. Take care of my body till I return. If I don't wake up within three days, bury the body under the *neem* tree.' So saying, he left his body.

"The Special Committee of the Village Council examined the body and unanimously agreed that Baba was dead. They went ahead with preparations for the burial. But Magalsapathy protested vehemently. 'Baba is bound to return. I shall not permit you to bury the body, come what may,' he shouted, embracing the body tightly. The village folk laughed derisively at his blind faith. They thought it bordered on insanity.

"For three days, Magalsapathy safeguarded the body of Baba, as stipulated by him. Before the end of the third day, Baba's spirit returned and he awoke. He lived 32 years thereafter," narrated Rege.

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Rege was associated with Baba for about eight years in all. He used to come to Shirdi from Indore as often as possible. Whenever he came, it was his practice to stay for a few days there and drink deep of Baba's *darshan*. Baba regarded Rege as a favourite child and called him 'Bala', (the little darling).

"You have moved so closely with Baba. Can you recall any miracle he performed?" I asked Rege. He was silent for a while and then asked. "What do you mean by miracles? Is it materialisation of tiny statues of gods, or sacred ash or *kumkum*?" And then he added, "If that's what you mean, I have to admit that I have not seen Baba perform any such black magic or jugglery. He could easily have indulged in such 'miracles' with success. But he achieved greater things. He transformed the minds of men and even their characteristics. Human behaviour and tendencies underwent miraculous changes under his influence. By a look, by a word, even by a smile, he brought about revolutionary changes in a person's life. Have you heard about Das Kanu Maharaj?"

"No!"

"He was a policeman. Initially, he refused to see Baba. But Baba's grace fell on him. That did the trick. He was put to a series of tests because of which he had to face serious problems. He ultimately quit the police department and became one of Baba's staunch followers. That is not the end of the story. By Baba's blessings and will, Das Kanu, an adept in the folklore of his village, became an engaging Puranic storyteller who drew huge audiences. He went from place to place and gave musical discourses on the lives of holy men and instilled *bhakthi* in the hearts

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of the multitude. In course of time, he sang songs on Baba's doctrines and teachings, his way of living and his achievements and spread his fame far and wide. Many who heard him, rushed to Shirdi to have Baba's *darshan*. Though he didn't have any schooling, he wrote a valuable commentary on the *Isopanishad*. He acknowledged that all this was made possible by Baba's grace. Baba turned many an ordinary person, who sought his blessings, into useful citizens of society. He elevated their thinking, and ennobled their lives. I do not think there is a greater miracle than this," Rege said.

"I entirely agree with you. Occult practices and tantric powers are but the initial steps in the ladder of spiritual evolution. Realised souls like Baba can control the five elements by their spiritual attainments and yogic practices," I said.

"That's it exactly! Baba did perform certain miracles in the initial stages. When he made his appearance in Shirdi as a youth, he was mistaken for a lunatic dressed as a fakir. He was in rags, eating whatever came his way, wandering in the forests and groves. Sometimes, he would dance in ecstasy, to the jingling of tiny bells tied to his feet, singing Kabir's couplets. His attractive face had a rare brilliance and gradually people started looking upon him as a wonder-man. In course of time, he was curing persons of their ailments with a variety of medicinal herbs. But he refused all money given to him. Later, the wandering Baba settled in that dilapidated mosque. To light a number of earthen lamps which he arranged in rows, he would beg for oil from a couple of shopkeepers nearby, who obliged him without a murmur. One day, the shopkeepers decided not to give any more oil to Baba. 'Why

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should we indefinitely fulfil the whims and fancies of a freak fakir?' they thought.

"When Baba approached them that evening for oil, they sent him back saying, 'There is no stock'. They uttered a falsehood without any qualms of conscience. Baba was helpless and returned to the mosque. He felt depressed, not because he was turned away but because the merchants had lied to him for a trivial reason. Baba, who never tired of insisting that you must observe truth in word, deed and action, decided to teach them a lesson. On that day he performed a real 'miracle' for all to see.

"Baba examined the oil container. There was a little oil left at the bottom. He poured water into it, shook it well and drank it. Then he filled the vessel with pure water, and poured a little in each of the earthen lamps. He then put a wick in each and lit one wick after the another. All the lamps remained aglow throughout the night!

"The people, who had come out in large numbers to scoff, were stunned by this happening. The shopkeepers fell at Baba's feet and sought his pardon. And thereafter they became his devout followers."

To illustrate the supernatural powers of Baba, Rege recounted another incident.

It was Baba's habit to sleep on the ill-kept and dirty floor of the mosque, using a torn piece of cloth for his bed. One of his devotees took pity on him and presented him with a wooden plank to sleep on. Baba suspended it from the roof, like a swing, and slept on it.

How Baba got on to the plank which was close to the roof and how he got down from it was a mystery. His devotees could not determine how he reached the plank.

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They saw him sitting on the floor one moment and the next moment he was lying on the plank.

The crowd that thronged to see this 'miracle' swelled day by day. This irritated Baba so much that, in a fit of anger, he broke the plank to pieces and resumed his old habit of sleeping on the floor with a piece of cloth under him.

Baba was endowed with limitless powers, went on Rege. He could gauge the feelings and thought-currents passing through all individuals. As an evolved being of omniscient perception, he knew the past, present and future.

Once, Baba, who was capable of delving into the minds of those who came to see him, performed a miracle to convince a visitor who doubted his abilities. This person informed his friends that he had planned to stay at Shirdi for three days and if, during that period, Baba convinced him of his greatness by performing some miracles, would accept him as his guru.

When he came to see Baba, as was the custom, he left his chappals in a corner before he entered the mosque. He did not attempt to come near Baba, nor did he care to introduce himself. He observed Baba for some time from a distance, and then retraced his steps. When he found that his chappals were missing, he made enquiries but to no effect. And so he returned to his quarters, slightly upset by the loss.

When he came out of the room to wash his hands after his meal, he saw an urchin passing that way, carrying a pair of chappals tied to a twig and shouting, *'Hari ka beta, Jari ka peta'*. On close scrutiny, he recognised the pair of chappals as his. He beckoned the youngster and

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asked him, "Where did you find these chappals? They are mine."

"Is your name Hari?" the boy asked in reply.

"Yes."

"Is your father's name Khanoba?"

"Yes, of course."

"Have you a lace turban?"

"Yes, I have," he said.

"Then it is O K. Undoubtedly this pair is yours. You may have it," said the urchin and handed over the chappals to him.

Accepting the chappals, Hari asked how the boy knew who he was.

"Baba gave me the chappals and asked me to shout as I did. He said find out where Khanoba's son Hari is, and find out if he has a laced turban. If you meet such a person, restore this pair of chappals to him!"

Hari was stupefied, but when he recovered from the shock he reflected, "Baba saw through my trick. He knew that I was incredulous. He completely floored me with this remarkable feat." And yet another devotee joined the flock.

A secret doubt lurked in me whether Baba had been conversant with our Vedas, Shastras and Puranas. I was eager to know if he quoted them or referred to them while giving advice or messages. So I asked Rege if he had ever seen Baba reading any books.

"No, I have never seen him reading books. I have seen some people placing books, like the *Bhagavatha, Ramayana* and *Bhagavad Gita,* in front of Baba, so that he might bless them with his golden hands. Baba would just glance through them for a second or two and return them

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to the owner. Some would bring manuscripts of verses composed by them or commentaries on Vedic lore written by them for approval and publication. Without going through them, Baba would reject some and approve others.

"I remember one incident distinctly. Das Kanu Maharaj brought his manuscript of Baba's biography. At the time, Baba was seated against a wall, both his legs stretched. When Das Kanu placed the bundle of notebooks at his feet, Baba quickly withdrew his legs, took the bundle in both hands and placed it on his head, before returning it to him. Everyone understood the gesture as a sign of his having approved the manuscript.

"As far as I remember, I have never seen Baba discussing our religious lore with anyone. But I know for certain that he instructed some devotees to regularly read books like *Rama Vijayam*, Eknath's *Bhagavatha, Gnaneswari, Bhagavad Gita* and *Vishnu Sahasranamam*."

"Did Baba ever ask you to read any particular sacred book?"

"Never. On the contrary, Baba was emphatic that I shouldn't read any book."

"Did Baba give you any *upadesa*, that is, any set of mantras to continuously chant mentally?"

"As far as I can recollect, Baba never gave any *upadesa* to any individual personally. Instead, through his occasional parables, casual banter and child-like pranks, he used to drive home philosophical truths and make us wiser. Take these incidents:

"One day, four of us were chatting with Baba in the mosque. Just then a devotee placed a plateful of plantains of the reddish variety before him. That variety was my favourite. I looked at them longingly. 'As usual, Baba

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will have them distributed, and I am bound to get my share,' I expected.

"Baba took one of the plantains, peeled it, gave the fruit to someone and handed me the skin, saying laughingly, 'Come on, eat, eat'. I ate. He took another fruit, did likewise and I also did as before. He took yet another plantain, peeled the skin, ate one half himself and offered me the other half. When I began eating it, he asked with a mischievous smile, 'Is it tasty?'

"I looked upon this incident as an invaluable lesson in life. That I should never get lost in material allurements. If I yearn for them, I will have to suffer ultimately, like eating the skin of the plantain. If we succumb to the glittering attractions of life, we will come to grief one day or the other. No wonder this *upadesa* helped me to change my outlook and shaped my life accordingly.

"On another occasion, I prepared lime juice for Baba. As I always arrogantly imagined I was more devoted to my Master than others, I tasted the juice before I gave it to Baba, to find out if it tasted good. Baba gave half of it to a disciple who was seated near him.

"After Baba had his first sip, his facial expression registered disappointment. Evidently he didn't like it. 'Oh, it is awfully sour. Horrible to taste. I am really surprised that a disciple who boasts so much about his devotion to me prepared this horrible stuff. I don't know why they torture me like this.' He was visibly put out. Even the disciple declared it sour. I tasted it. And it was unbearably sour. I was really perplexed. When I had tasted the juice before offering it to Baba, it had been excellent. In spite of my best attention and care, I had to incur my Master's displeasure. 'Perhaps something is still wanting

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in my devotion and service. Probably I must learn to be more humble and unassuming,' I thought, relapsing into an introspective mood.

"Wisdom dawned on me at once. 'Total surrender is the *sine qua non* of service to one's guru. The ego must be done away with.' When I realised the truth, Baba smiled broadly.

" 'Poor boy, don't worry. You prepared it properly. Now you take it, it will taste fine,' my Master said in good humour. I tasted the juice. How it sweetened my tongue — and heart too!"

* * *

No one knows authoritatively what Baba's age was when he died on Vijayadasami Day, October 15, 1918. It is generally believed that he spent more than fifty years in Shirdi.

Baba's place of birth, parentage, age, religion, caste — everything about him — is shrouded in mystery.

Baba was an enigma till the end. Though he lived and moved about as an ordinary person, he led the life of a recluse. He was a perfect saint and a prophet of a rare order. His contemporaries, who had the privilege and honour of observing and experiencing each facet of his divine existence, witnessed his actions, listened to his spoken words and became wise by his eloquent silences.

For many years, Baba did not ask for any monetary offerings from any of his devotees. Only during the last ten or fifteen years did he accept small cash donations, known as *dhakshina* from those who came for his *darshan.* Prior to that, only local residents and villagers from nearby places used to come to the mosque. In those days, Baba,

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true to his saintly order, begged for his daily bread in five houses. Later, as his glory and fame spread, the learned and the affluent started coming from distant places to seek his *darshan*. As more and more such devotees started arriving, Baba decided to collect *dhakshina* from them.

But Baba did not ask for it from everyone. Only a chosen few had that rare privilege. He expected them to give every time they came. From some, he collected it several times during the same day. The rationale behind this only Baba knew.

What Baba collected during the course of the day, he distributed by evening. He collected *dhakshina* from one set of persons and gave it to another set of persons. Even if he were to receive a thousand rupees on a particular day, Baba would be reduced to penury by the evening. During Baba's last days, heaps of money were thrown at his feet. All of it was given away to the needy. There was only 16 rupees in Dwaraka Mayi on the day Baba attained *Mahasamadhi*.

Some devotees stopped coming to Shirdi, because Baba pestered them for *dhakshina*! They were the unfortunate ones, who were so attached to material wealth and pleasures that they missed the experience of everlasting bliss. They were the worshippers of Mammon who were denied the grace of God.

There were others who wanted to be very clever. They hid a portion of their possessions and surrendered only the balance, saying, "Baba, I have only this much to spare". To such reluctant and miserly devotees he would say, "Surrender the remaining five rupees also". He who thought himself to be very clever would present a sorry figure and surrender the five rupees meekly.

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The truly devoted disciples sincerely believed that all they possessed belonged to Baba and spontaneously surrendered everything as *guru dhakshina*, without any reservation.

Baba gave his own explanation for these collections. "I don't ask for *dhakshina* from everyone. Allah commands me to get it only from specific persons. I collect from them because of their indebtedness in some previous birth. I collect but little, and give back fourfold. Also, I discharge my debts with these collections."

Whatever be the real import of such a declaration, it is obvious that he wanted to impress on us the fact that we must look upon helping and serving others as our good fortune and as a rare opportunity afforded to us by God. We have no right to be arrogant or feel 'I have', 'I give', 'He depends on me' etc. Rege narrated an incident in which Baba taught a lesson to a person who was vain and egocentric.

Nana Sahib Chandorkar was the disciple and devotee of Baba next only to Magalsapathy in prominence. He belonged to a high caste, and was conversant with the religious scriptures. He had a distinguished academic career and was a Deputy Collector. Baba came to know by intuition that he had been his disciple in a previous birth and, so, sent for him.

Chandorkar, a devout Hindu by birth and practice, at first resisted seeing a 'Muslim fakir'. Only after three summons from Baba did he visit Shirdi. He saw. He was conquered. He surrendered. Receiving enlightenment, he was elevated in the spiritual plane.

Baba observed certain weaknesses in Chandorkar in the initial stages and helped him to overcome them.

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Baba made it a point to ask Chandorkar for *dhakshina* often. So Chandorkar started imagining that Baba was depending on him exclusively for big donations. Baba used the services of Rege to remove Chandorkar's sense of self-importance and vanity.

Once, when Rege was in Shirdi, Baba emptied Rege's purse by endlessly asking for *dhakshina*. When pressed for further donation, Rege expressed his inability to meet his demand saying that he did not have even a pie to spare. Even then, Baba demanded something more. He asked Rege to raise a loan from Madhava Rao Dashpande, popularly known as 'Shama', and give it as *dhakshina*. Rege had no other choice except to approach Shama for help.

Shama, whose life's mission was service to Baba and his devotees, was a very poor man. He thought that there must be a deeper significance to Baba sending Rege to him in spite of the former's knowledge of his financial circumstances. He told Rege, "Baba needs me only and not my money. It is to drive home this basic fact that he has sent you to me. Kindly convey my obeisance to him."

Then Baba sent Rege to H.S.Dikshit. When Rege approached Dikshit, he had no money. "Baba sent you to me to impress upon you the fact that it is no damage to a person's dignity to beg for his Master," Dikshit explained and sent Rege empty-handed.

This time, Rege was sent to Chandorkar by Baba. He also refused help and explained the policy he was following while giving *dhakshina* to Baba.

Whenever he made a trip to Shirdi, Chandorkar would deposit a large portion of his money with his friend at Kopargaon. When Chandorkar's cash on hand was ex-

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hausted by giving *dhakshina*, he would replace it by further supplies from his Kopargaon friend. "Because of this arrangement, I have never said to Baba that I have no money," boasted Chandorkar to Rege, who in turn conveyed the information to Baba. On hearing this, Baba sent for Chandorkar, who came running to Dwaraka Mayi.

Baba started demanding *dhakshina* by instalments and Chandorkar soon found himself a pauper. At this stage, Baba asked for something more! Poor Chandorkar was stunned. Chandorkar, who, just a while ago, had boasted that he was a rich donor who had never said 'no' to Baba was put to great shame. Baba had taught him humility.

It was believed by his followers that Baba saw forthcoming events as clearly as a person saw his face in a mirror. As he knew beforehand the good and the bad that would befall them, Baba would, without assigning any reason, simply instruct his devotees to "Do this" or "Don't do that".

Those who came for *darshan* usually left Shirdi only after obtaining Baba's permission. He would permit some to leave. To others he would say, "Go tomorrow". To a few he would say, "Why are you in a hurry? I know when to send you. Stay until I ask you to go".

If Baba gave *udhi* and said "You may go", nothing went wrong on the journey and the person reached home safely. If, however, someone left without obtaining his permission, or disregarding his injuctions, he invariably paid the penalty *en route*. His horse might fall, the cart might capsize, or robbers might waylay him. Sometimes such persons would miss their train. Rege said that such inconveniences were common and narrated a couple of instances of which he had personal knowledge.

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One of the staunch followers of Baba was Purandare. As his mother was longing to visit Pandharpur to have *darshan* of Lord Panduranga Vittal, Purandare was anxious to obtain Baba's permission for the pilgrimage. Baba, who knew this intuitively, asked Purandare's mother, "When do you propose to go to Pandharpur?" The next moment the old woman saw Baba as the Lord himself. She shouted, "Oh, *Pandharinatha*, *Pundarika Varadha*" in ecstasy and fell at his feet. Later, whenever Baba asked her, "Why haven't you visited Pandharpur?" she would reply, "For me, Shirdi is Pandharpur. Baba is Pandharinatha".

On another occasion, a doctor from South Africa visited Shirdi. A Hindu and a Rama *bhaktha*, he was hesitant to enter the mosque and bow before a Muslim sadhu. Baba realised his predicament and appeared before him as Lord Ramachandramurthi. The doctor was in raptures and instantaneously fell at his feet exclaiming "Kodanda Rama", "Kalyana Rama", "Pattabhi Rama" etc.

* * *

Baba's devotees decided to make a monarch of a mendicant. They got ready a silver throne for him whose seat hitherto had been a bundle of rags. They adorned his head, till then covered with a dirty cloth, with a costly crown. Velvet cushions replaced wooden planks. A colourful umbrella made of satin, royal robes inlaid with *zari*, bedecked horses, silver sticks, fantastic fans! A bedroom with eye-catching decorations, an artificial moon to complete the picture. Scents and incense sweetened the air. Flowery arches, artistic *pandals* and auspicious music galore!

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Sachidananda Swaroopa Samartha Sadguru Sainath Maharaj is coming. Be silent! Stand in attention! ... Be ready to receive him.

But the simple sadhu surrounded by this paraphernalia, pomp and pageantry, remained unmoved and untouched by it all.

Devotees, for whom Baba was God incarnate, worshipped him in the traditional style three times a day. Baba resisted this practice at first. But, as one who was beyond all preferences and inhibitions and always existing in the mental plane, he relented and submitted himself to the *arathi* performed by his followers and admirers.

Some enthusiastic disciples wished to take their 'god' in procession in a *palki* and actually got one ready for the purpose. But Baba sternly refused to comply with their request. So the unused *palki* was kept outside the mosque.

One day, a disciple rushed to Baba to break the news of the theft of two tiny silver horses attached to the *palki*. Baba had a hearty laugh and said, "Did the thief steal the horses alone? He could have taken the *palki* itself."

Later, Rege and Avasti, another disciple, jointly had a *ratha* (wooden car) made for Baba's use. They parked it outside the mosque and showed it to Baba. Baba just smiled and withdrew. The next morning, Baba told Das Kanu Maharaj, "Das Kanu, just see this abhorrent act of my disciples. They have kept a vehicle ready for my corpse: Is it fair and decent?"

Das Kanu was upset by this outrageous act and exclaimed, "Baba, you should not be lenient or treat this lightly". After listening to him abuse the offenders for a while, Baba laughed, saying, "Can't you see, a car is

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parked outside? I plan to travel throughout the world in that car."

On another occasion, when a thief stole some gold ornaments and was arrested, he told the Magistrate that Baba had given him the ornaments. Baba was summoned to give evidence, but, on the submission of some disciples, the Magistrate agreed to examine Baba in the mosque.

MAG: What is your name?

BABA: People call me Sai.

MAG: What is your father's name?

BABA: God.

MAG: Where do you reside?

BABA: Everywhere.

MAG: Did you give these ornaments to this person?

BABA: Who else could have given them?

The enquiry came to an end. Realising that the answers were full of mystical import, and beyond legal validity, the Magistrate punished the offender. When this judgment was conveyed to Baba he said, "It is not the magistrate who actually punished him. He who gave him the ornaments, punished him."

* * *

A silence suddenly engulfed the room where we were. I realised that it was getting late. A relative of Rege indirectly suggested that Rege was getting tired. But Rege said, "If you have anything more to ask, do so".

"Were you at Shirdi on the day of Baba's passing away?" I asked.

Rege was upset by my question, but answered:

"Unfortunately, no. On the day of the *Mahasamadhi*, I was in my native place. I was bedridden then. But Baba

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had by implication enabled me three days before the occurrence to infer that his end was nearing. I was spending sleepless nights due to my illness and the knowledge of Baba's indifferent health aggravated my uneasiness on a particular day. At midnight, Baba's portrait on the wall suddenly fell on my bed. I took it as an inauspicious omen. After three days, the news of his passing away was conveyed to me."

"What did Baba suffer from? Was he conscious till the last moment?"

"Yes. Three or four days before his death, he was feeling uncomfortable and exhausted. Though his movements were partly restricted, he was attending to his routine without much difficulty. Baba was fully conscious and his mental faculties were intact till he breathed his last. He was very mirthful from the morning and was joking with the persons standing around him. He expressed his wish to leave Dwaraka Mayi and occupy the quarters nearby known as 'Buti Waada'. At 1 p.m. he called a woman and gave her six rupees saying, 'I owe you this amount'. Again he sent for her and gave her three more rupees. Some time after, he beckoned a beggar standing in the street and handed over six annas to him saying, 'I am returning the loan I took from you in my previous birth. Please accept it.' It was then 2 p.m. He sent someone near him to fetch the earthen pipe he smoked. But when he returned, Baba was not there to smoke it. He had left his body before the pipe arrived!"

After an understandably deep silence, Rege described how Baba had a premonition of his approaching end and how he had made arrangements for the erection of a shrine for his *samadhi*.

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During the early days of his stay at Shirdi, Baba had raised a flower garden. Later, Baba's disciple Baba Sahib Buti purchased this plot. As visitors to Shirdi swelled every year, Buti sought Baba's permission to build a choultry for them. Baba gave permission on condition that a small space was left in the middle. "I intend building a shrine there," he said.

When someone asked which God he intended to install there, quick came his answer: "It is for Lord Radhakrishna. I will be raising a shrine for 'divine love'." Thereafter, whenever Baba passed that way, he invariably made some mystic signs with his stick.

"Baba's words always came true. Verily a shrine of Love emerged there. It is no wonder that the *samadhi* of Baba, who is love incarnate, is regarded by everyone as a 'temple of divine love'," related Rege. And then he narrated the story of Radhakrishna Aayi, a woman who was widowed early in life and who dedicated the rest of her life to the service of Baba.

* * *

Sundari Bai of Ahmadnagar was a beauty. She was a young girl when her parents got her married, as was the custom in those days. She led a contented and happy married life, but it was only for a few years. She lost her husband when she was only twenty. She silently suffered in solitude, resigning herself to the designs of destiny, but her heart yearned for selfless service. She was determined that her body must perish only in the service of God. Driven by this urge, she left home.

Baba, who was never tired of declaring that "whatever the distance, it is my responsibility to bring my devotees

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to my side", brought, by his invisible and inscrutable ways, Sundari Bai to Shirdi. She resolved to serve Baba, the embodiment of love. And Sundari Bai became Radhakrishna Aayi, 'The Mother of Love'.

When she came to Shirdi in 1907, she was about 22 years old. In the prime of youth, she chose to lead a life of dedication and sacrifice.

Radhakrishna Aayi would wash the mosque while Baba was on his rounds. She would cleanse the personal utensils of Baba. She would sweep the pathway leading to Lendi Gardens whenever Baba intended to go there. She would do so moving backwards, so that she would not defile the ground cleaned once by stepping on it again. She held Baba's feet in such great esteem.

She had the voice of a nightingale. If she sat in a corner and started singing the Lord's name, she could be mistaken for Meera Bai, the peerless devotee of Lord Krishna. Those who heard her divine and emotional music were enthralled and spiritually elevated. In such moments of total identification with her inner self, when she ecstatically experienced the immortal spirit, she ceased to be conscious of herself or the world outside.

Apart from possessing a heart full of love and devotion, she was resolute in her mission. She had a strong physique and inexhaustible stamina; she was never tired of work. On festival days, guests in their hundreds would pour into the Mother's house and *prasad* for all of them would be prepared in her quarters. Affluent persons who were impressed by her selfless devotion to Baba gave donations liberally.

Radhakrishna Aayi was responsible for setting up the Sai Samsthan. She collected the materials needed for the

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Samsthan from devotees. It was she who conceived the idea of the Chawadi procession and helped organise it in a fitting manner. She displayed a rare aesthetic sense in decorating with mirrors, flowers and paintings the bedroom she arranged for Baba in the Chawadi (to which he retired on alternate days). It was also Radhakrishna Aayi who introduced the *Thiruppalliyezhuchi* and *Sayanarathi* for Baba.

All of this was pure and selfless devotion. The Mother was hardly seen in the audience hall of Baba, called the 'Durbar'. She never sought elucidation of spiritual problems from Baba. Nor did she seek incantations for meditation. But Baba spoke to her through telepathy and fulfilled her spiritual needs.

Baba showered his compassion on her and sent her a portion of the food he begged every day. Radhakrishna Aayi would have her lunch only after the arrival of that *prasad*. If it did not come to her for some reason, she would fast on that day. She never cooked for herself.

* * *

Rege first came to Shirdi in 1910. When the *darshan* was over on that day, Baba told Rege, "Radhakrishna Aayi is mother to both of us". From that moment, Rege regarded her as his mother and gave her the affection of a son, though she was older only by three years. Whenever Rege visited Shirdi, he made it a point to stay with his 'mother' only. On those days, Baba sent enough food for both 'mother' and 'son'.

One year, Rege had urgent work pending in Court, and had written to the Mother excusing himself from attending the *Guru Pooja* ceremonies (worship of the Master).

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But Aayi was unwilling to make the necessary arrangements for the celebrations if her 'son' could not attend. She expressed this decision to everyone.

The auspicious day arrived. Aayi mentally prayed to Baba that her 'son' should join her if she were to participate in the happy function. Baba, who knew her agony and yearning, sent her two chapattis as *prasad* at nine in the morning. At once she knew that her son was sure to come and her joy knew no bounds.

Could the Mother's prayer or Baba's will ever fail? Rege was able leave at the last moment. He arrived in Shirdi in the afternoon by train, just in time for *Guru Pooja* and *arathi*.

When Radhakrishna Aayi had a severe attack of malaria, Baba, who came to her house, did not enter it. Instead, he had a ladder brought, inclined it on the wall, climbed to the roof and walked out through the next house. The very next day she was completely cured.

Rege narrated one more incident to stress the enigmatic and mystical relationship that existed between Baba and Aayi.

Baba had gone to the Lendi Gardens. So the Mother went to the mosque to clean it. After she had finished, she felt exhausted and her breathing was unusually hard. She felt giddy and swooned and fell on the verandah.

When Baba returned from his rounds, he saw her in an unconscious state. He gently patted her on the shoulder and asked her soothingly, "Radhakrishna, get up! Why do you worry? When I am here, why do you fear?" The next moment she regained consciousness, got up and ran to her quarters. "Two months after this incident my 'mother' passed away," said Rege choking with emotion.

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Rege went on to say that his 'mother's' death was still an unsolved mystery.

It was Narwekar, one of Baba's devotees, who wrote to Rege that Aayi had died during childbirth. Rege could not understand how she could have been pregnant at all. And he could not ever get a satisfactory explanation.

Rege came to Shirdi two months later. Some people taunted him in the guise of offering condolences. They expressed their sense of horror that such a despicable incident should have taken place at Shirdi. Rege refused to be drawn into a discussion, but he merely said, "Are your hearts made of granite? How dare you speak scandalously about a mother to her own son? By Baba's command, I had accepted her as my mother. Whatever be the cause of her death, I treat the ignominy attributed to her as my own and suffer it silently." Just then a call came from Baba and they all left for the mosque.

Rege, who was oppressed by a sense of personal loss and heart-rending agony, shed copious tears and fell at Baba's feet. Baba knew the mental torture Rege was undergoing. He was helpless. He could not be interpreting the rationale behind every act of fate to every human being.

Baba asked Shama to narrate what had transpired between Rege and his friends in the choultry. Shama reported verbatim what the friends had said to Rege and what Rege had replied.

Baba asked Rege to come near and said to him, "They do not know the efficacy of a mother's love. She was mother to me and to you." These words quietened Rege's mental agitation a little.

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On another occasion, Baba told Rege, "Radhakrishna Aayi wanted deliverance from her karma. I promised her that I would take care of it. One day, she came running to the mosque crying, 'Baba, I cannot brook any more delay'. She entered my heart and slept there peacefully." Baba touched his chest and showed Rege the place where the Mother finally rested.

Almost in tears, Rege concluded, "My divine Mother merged with my Master. Let anyone imagine anything! I don't care. As far as I am concerned, Radhakrishna Aayi is a *Yoga Maya* who gave me a spiritual life and solace, like Yogini to Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. I cannot ever forget it."

* * *

After our meeting with Rege, we went to a hall adjoining the *Samadhi Mandir*. We were shown a glass room in which were preserved the personal belongings of Baba.

Two huge vessels which Baba used for poor-feeding, the tin with which he begged for food daily, the jug he used for drinking water, three pairs of chappals, a soft stone used as a bath soap are kept in that miniature museum. There is a huge portrait of Baba and another painting of a procession. The various embellishments, like fans, banners, buntings and garlands usually used for the Chawadi procession, are also exhibited there, in addition to his long shirts and coats.

The silver throne presented by his devotees finds a prominent place. The velvet bed and pillows are kept intact. There are numerous earthen pipes used by Baba for smoking. I saw a small statue of Sri Anjaneya. When I saw an old-fashioned rickety gramophone lying in a

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corner, my curiosity was kindled. I went near it and examined it closely.

As I had heard that Baba was a lover of music, I was interested in learning what his favourite song was. I read the label on the record. It said '*Khayaal,* sung by Miss Govardhan of Calcutta'.

Later, we went to the market to talk to some old villagers. I spoke with a few old men, but came away none the wiser. One Babaji Lakshman Ratan Parki insisted that he had seen Baba as a young man and distinctly noted that his ear lobes were pierced (a Hindu custom). He also said that dogs and birds would answer Baba's calls, approach him without fear, and share his meal. On this note we returned to our room for the night.

* * *

Bharat, our glorious country, with a hoary past, is like a mighty ocean, unfathomable in its spiritual depth. You cannot assess with any measure of certainty the extent and nature of the rich wealth buried underneath. I have always had a hearty laugh to myself whenever persons who have not seen even a tiny portion of this ocean, with no opportunity even to stand on its shores and wet their feet, point an accusing finger at the superficial drawbacks and shortcomings of this ancient society, declaring, "Our present state of poverty and decadence are due to our conservative approach to the problems of life. Instead of endlessly boasting of our moth-eaten cultural heritage, we must learn to keep pace with the changing times and readjust our pattern of living and method of functioning." I have learnt to dismiss such talk as the prattle of a child. What is the use of conquering the whole world, if we lose

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our soul in the bargain? All the enjoyments of modern life, all the comforts and conveniences vouchsafed by the advancement of science and technology, all the luxuries afforded by economic progress and the pursuit of money and power do not ensure tranquillity of mind, which is, after all, the ultimate wish and aim of man. Such a state of mind, in which eternal peace and joy reign, is experienced when we go on a pilgrimage to ancient temples and sacred rivers or when we meet noble and genuine spiritual masters, or when we read or hear about the lives and achievements of saints who have enriched the earth.

Engrossed in such thought, while lying in bed, I suddenly saw Sai Baba in flesh and blood. I saw him on my mental screen, busy with his daily routine. I saw vividly, but in a jumbled sequence, many of the past occurrences and episodes connected with Baba's life. There need be no doubt about the credibility of this revelation because Baba had declared, "Even after my disappearance, I shall speak from my grave, and grant *darshan* to those who seek it with faith and earnestness". And this is what I saw in my fancy...

At four thirty, Shirdi village was bathed in a morning mist of moderate density. There was a cool breeze of bearable intensity and the birds were chirping merrily. My heart throbbing with ineffable joy, I entered Dwaraka Mayi. Baba had just then awakened, and three or four persons were singing a hymn, performing *arathi* with flaming camphor.

Baba sat on his bed. His face, reflected in the camphor light, shone with the dazzling brilliance of a thousand suns. The grace from his eyes engulfed all present in ever-lasting joy. They screamed in ecstasy "Oh, Pandu-

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ranga Vittala", "Dwarakanatha", "Dasaratha Rama", "Trimbakeshwara", "Anjaneyamurthi", "The remover of our dangers", "The rescuer of the neglected and the down-trodden" and fell at his feet. I stood inconspicuously in a corner, but Baba's yogic glance fell on me. It passed through my entire body like an electric shock.

The devotees withdrew one after the other. Without exchanging a syllable with anyone, Baba got up with some difficulty, walked a few paces, came near the *dhuni* (the holy fireplace), sat in front of it, and became absorbed in silent concentration for more than half an hour. He then rose and limped to the backyard. Returning after a while, he had a wash on the verandah, and resumed his seat and repeated, "Allah malik" (God is the Master), "Hari", "Hari", "Ram Ram".

Just then a leper entered, removed the bandage from Baba's right hand, applied a ghee-like substance and massaged it. The person standing by my side informed me that the visitor was Bogoji Scindia, who had dedicated his life to the service of Baba. My informant added that Scindia's disease was slowly but surely being cured by the grace of Baba.

"What is that wound Baba has?" I asked. His reply shook me.

In 1910, on the day of Deepavali, Baba was sitting in front of the *dhuni* feeding it with pieces of firewood. Suddenly he thrust his right hand into the rising flames. They scorched his hand. Shama, who was standing near-by, was shocked beyond words, but jumped forward and pulled Baba back, asking him in agony, "Baba, why did you do this? Why have you burnt your hand?"

Baba smiled and replied, "What if my hand is burnt?

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I am happy I could intervene in time and save that child." Shama was nonplussed. But Baba continued, "Shama! In a distant village, a blacksmith's wife was busy with the furnace. Just then her husband called her rather urgently. In a hurry to go, she foolishly let her child, whom she was holding, fall into the furnace. Luckily I saved it in time."

After my informant left, I turned towards Baba. He was just then receiving his smoking pipe from Bogoji Scindia. After taking a puff, he gave it back to him. He in turn took a puff and returned it to Baba. They smoked it alternately for five minutes, after which Bogoji Scindia left.

Then Magalsapathy, Chandorkar, Dikshit, Mega and Datya Patel massaged Baba's hands and legs by turn. Baba exchanged a few pleasantries with them. They were not clearly audible.

After the morning brightened a little, Baba once again came to the verandah. He cleaned his teeth and face, then sat up and cleaned his fingers, finger by finger. He took a small jug, a piece of cloth and set off on his routine begging round.

The ground on which he walked barefoot was littered with sharp pebbles and thorns. His gait was leisurely and unsteady. He stood in front of a house and pleaded, "O mother, the poor fakir has come. Give me a morsel of food. Grant me a loaf of bread."

The great man who was born to satisfy the spiritual hunger of the masses, was begging to satisfy his physical hunger. He who was bountiful had assumed the role of a mendicant for the emancipation of mankind.

He bundled the rice and bread in a piece of cloth and received the soup, curd and milk in the tin container.

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During his begging round, many fell at his feet and sought his blessings. He uttered a couple of soothing words to each one of them and returned to the mosque. The grand Durbar then started. Devotees swarmed in.

Das Kanu Maharaj approached Baba and pleaded, "Baba, I am anxious to go to Prayag, and bathe in the Ganga-Yamuna confluence. I beg for leave to go there."

"Need you go thus far for a bath? The Prayag is here and you can bathe right now. Believe me. Sitting in the Dwaraka Mayi, I speak nothing but the truth," declared Baba.

Das Kanu bowed low and buried his head in Baba's feet. And wonder of wonders! From Baba's two toes, Ganga and Yamuna gushed forth. Das Kanu was overwhelmed with joy and sprinked the holy water over his head. In that emotional mood, he coined a couplet in praise of Baba's divine powers.

G.S.Kaparde, Bal Gangadhar Tilak's political lieutenant, was seated near Baba. Baba said to him, "Why do you worry? Continuously chant 'Rajaram', 'Rajaram'. All your troubles will vanish and you will be blessed with abiding peace. You are sure to come face to face with God."

Baba turned towards Pradhan and said, "Chant 'Sri Rama, Jayarama, Jaya Jaya Rama". Just then Dikshit came in. Baba explained to him the efficacy of 'Hari Nama' (the name of Sri Narayana). "Because I was constantly meditating upon Hari's name, one day he gave *darshan* to me. Thereafter I discontinued giving medicines to the sick. I started giving *udhi* in the name of Hari. And all were relieved of their woes and became happy." Afterwards, he advised Das Kanu to read *Vishnu Sahasranamam*

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(the thousand names of Maha Vishnu) regularly. To drive home the message, he recalled an incident. "Once, I suffered from unbearable chest pain. I did not know what to do about it. I kept the *Vishnu Sahasranamam* volume under my chest, hugged it hard and slept. The thousand named-Hari took pity on me and relieved me of my pain."

Just then, Shama came running in, fretting and fuming. I was told by the person who accompanied him that he had been bitten by a poisonous reptile, and his life might be in danger.

Baba was in a great rage. He did not seem to sympathise with his devotee's lot. He drove him out shouting, "Get down and go". His tone was harsh. Shama was shocked at Baba's peculiar behaviour. He felt very depressed that his God had let him down miserably. Those assembled too were nonplussed by Baba's temper.

After a while, Baba called Shama to his side and gently said, "There is no danger to your life. The poison will not affect you. You may go home."

Later the significance of Baba's anger became clear to everyone. Baba had not shouted at Shama, he had only commanded the poison to get out!

A lizard chirped on the wall. Someone sitting nearby asked Baba if the chirp of a lizard was a good omen or an ill-omen?

"You are mistaken. This lizard is just expressing its happiness because her younger sister is expected any moment from Aurangabad. That is why it is clucking like this," explained Baba.

The devotee could not make head or tail of this explanation. He just blinked in astonishment.

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A few moments later, there arrived a man on horseback, who announced that he was coming from Aurangabad. He said he had broken journey in Shirdi to buy horsegram and was taking advantage of the opportunity to visit Baba. When he took a gunny bag from his saddle and opened it, a small lizard fell from it and scampered up the wall. Baba asked the devotee to watch it carefully. He did so. The old lizard and the new one met and from their actions it was obvious it was a joyous reunion. What Baba predicted had come true. The sister had indeed arrived from Aurangabad!

Baba abruptly got up and walked out. Bogoji spread the silken umbrella and accompanied him. Four or five prominent disciples followed them, guessing that Baba was going to Lendi Garden. I too went with them.

On the way, the Khapardes paid obeisance to Baba. She wept aloud and said, "Baba, my son is stricken with plague. He is struggling for life. Only you can save his life. We are at your mercy."

Baba comforted the wailing mother. "There is no cause for alarm. Your son's life is not in danger. He will survive this attack. I took his ailment upon myself two days ago, just see for yourself." So saying, Baba opened his long tunic a little and exposed his thigh. Everyone saw four or five egg-sized boils on his skin. It was a heart-rending sight indeed.

Baba walked on. A funeral procession was passing by. Baba strewed flowers over the corpse. And shedding tears, he said, "One of my noble disciples is dead and gone". He mourned the death as a personal loss and wept aloud like a child. It was a rare and touching scene for the onlookers. With tears still rolling down his cheeks, Baba

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kept gazing at the funeral procession till it turned the corner. He then walked slowly to Lendi Garden.

On emerging from the garden after half an hour, Baba saw a herd of sheep being led by a shepherd. He paid 32 rupees and bought a couple of sheep from him. Tatya Patel and Shama who were with Baba wondered at this peculiar bargain and asked him, "Why did you pay so much when you could have had them for four rupees?"

"Why should I care about money? Do I have a home or family? For whom should I amass wealth and bequeath property?" Baba asked in good humour and paid some more money to the shepherd to feed the sheep. He waited there till they were fed, patting and fondling them. Then he left, but before he did so, he restored the two sheep to the shepherd!

As he returned to the mosque, he narrated the life story of the two sheep to his disciples. In their previous birth, they were human beings and bosom friends of Baba. Enmity developed between them and a feud ensued in course of time. They attacked each other ruthlessly. One used a big stick while the other used an axe. Both of them were killed in their fight and they were born again as sheep. Baba recognised his former friends in that herd and in a reminiscent mood had kept them company for a while!

On reaching Dwaraka Mayi, Baba took his seat. *Gita* and *Sahasranama* were recited in a corner. A devotee was reading aloud Eknath's *Bhagavatha*, the life and exploits of Lord Krishna. Just then some Muslims came in and began reciting the Holy Koran. Baba joined them with great fervour.

Someone rushed in and bowed to Baba.

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"May I know who you are?" queried Baba.

"I am a Hindu by birth. I adopted Islam recently. I came to have your *darshan,*" he answered.

Baba's face reddened with rage. "Will you change your very father? Fie on you! Don't stand before me. Those who indulge in religious conversion, those who give up their traditional practices, rites and rituals, are banned from entering Dwaraka Mayi," Baba shouted at him.

Nana Chandorkar was standing crestfallen with a plate in his hand. "Baba, I had brought the sweets you wanted. But you chose to return them without even tasting them," he complained.

"Don't be silly. I took them."

"No, Baba, you hadn't touched them at all."

"Oh, my God! You have not become any wiser even after being with me for 18 years. When you placed the sweets in front of me, did you not notice the flies and ants feeding on them. What difference does it make if I eat or they eat? Does not the same *jeeva* (life force) dwell in me and in them?" asked Baba.

Chandorkar felt ashamed for not realising this earlier and surrendered himself completely to Baba. He sat by his side and mumbled a *sloka* from the *Gita.*

When Baba asked him to render the meaning of the *sloka*, Chandorkar explained it in detail. After hearing him, Baba gave a short discourse, giving a new and more acceptable meaning to the *sloka.* Chandorkar marvelled at the depth and extent of Baba's knowledge of Sanskrit and Upanishadic truths.

It was 1 p.m. *Arathi* over, Baba sat down for his lunch. Seven or eight persons took their seats on either side of

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Baba. While they ate the food they had brought, Baba ate the food he had begged and collected in the morning.

After lunch, Baba rested a while, then sent for Tatya Patel and enquired how the renovation work of the Anjaneya Temple was progressing. As they were talking, a fruit vendor came up to Baba. He looked at her enquiringly.

"Baba, in spite of my strenuous efforts in the hot sun, I could not dispose of my stock."

Baba paid from his pocket and purchased the entire basket of fruit, which he distributed to the poor.

At 4 p.m. Bala Gangadhar Tilak, the indefatigable freedom fighter who had grown grey in the service of the Motherland, came to see Baba. He explained to Baba the part played by him in the freedom movement and was anxious to know if he was following the right path.

Baba did not give him a direct answer. Instead, he merely said, "You are aging. You need rest. Why don't you retire from active political life?"

Baba had rightly anticipated that Tilak's era was ending and that the Gandhian era was emerging in Indian politics.

It was 8 p.m. Baba seemed to be exhausted. It was time for him to retire to the Chawadi. The devotees started the usual *bhajan*. Tatya Patel came near Baba and asked him in a whisper, "Baba, shall we start?" Baba attempted to stand up and Tatya Patel gave him a helping hand.

Satguru Sainath Maharajjiki jai. The chorus rent the air.

Baba walked slowly, with a small cane in his hand. Musical instruments blared. Fireworks contrived colourful designs in the sky. Both men and women sang the praises

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of Baba as they followed him reverently. Those who held the buntings and silver sticks, danced merrily in front.

Fanned by devotees on either side, the emperor of wisdom gracefully stepped down from the mosque.

Patel held his right hand, Magalsapathy his left. Babu Saheb Joh held the colourful umbrella over Baba's head.

The procession proceeded slowly.

As soon as the procession arrived near the Chawadi, Baba stood still. His face glittered with unearthly brilliance. He turned northwards, looked up at the sky and waved the cane up and down. The music soared to a crescendo.

Dikshit showered Baba with the flowers he was carrying and the glow in Baba's face was magnetic. Everyone was lost in that divine charm and splendour.

Later, Baba took his seat in the Chawadi. His followers dressed him in a very expensive coat. They placed the gem-studded crown on his head. They garlanded him and adorned him with gold jewellery. They applied a *tilak* on his forehead. They drank deep of the nectar of his heavenly beauty.

Babu Saheb Joh placed Baba's feet on a silver plate and bathed them in holy water, applied *chandan* to his hands, and offered him betelnut. These formalities over, the assembled fell at his feet.

The auspicious music was played to the beating of cymbals while Joh performed *arathi* before Baba. The devotees sang in unison:

Ovalu arathimajyaa Satgurunatha Sainatha

Baba spread his bed and slept. It was the *yoganidra* of the gods, sleeping yet awake. Baba's body slept. His soul was wide awake.

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The entire cosmos was filled with the jingling of the bells and the music of the heavens.

* * *

And I awoke. It was 6.30 in the morning when we reached the Shirdi bus stand.

Kesava Rao informed me that Rege had already arrived and had been enquiring whether I had come. I was really surprised that in spite of his age and the chill weather, he had taken the trouble to see us off. I went up to where Rege was waiting.

When we meet certain personalities, we are spontaneously awed by them. In their company, we enjoy the peace normally experienced in a temple. When we converse with them, we feel blissful, as if we are face to face with the embodiment of truth. Rege's proximity inspired such reverence in me.

I bowed to Rege and stood with folded arms. I felt like saying a thousand things to him. My heart throbbed and my lips quivered, but my throat was parched. I could hardly bring myself to utter a syllable. My eyes shed tears.

Rege assessed my feelings correctly and, asking me to sit by his side, hugged me in a gentle embrace. My mother must have hugged me with such soothing affection when I was an infant.

"Meeting you in Shirdi and hearing you talk about Baba has been a rare privilege and a unique honour for me. I will enshrine it in my heart forever and hope to benefit by it." The words flowed from the innermost recesses of my heart.

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"You saw everything for yourself at Shirdi. I have also told you what little I know about Baba. You may write what you feel ... but I have a request to make. Please write about my Master and leave me out. Don't mention my name at all. You may refer to me as a 'Sai devotee', but keep my identity anonymous," Rege pleaded with me, gripping my hands firmly with his trembling hands.

Immediately I smelt the sweet aroma of *chandan* and the fragrance of incense. Rege disappeared from my vision for a second. My wet eyes saw only the *chandan* stick and the incense stick which spread undying fragrance, completely eliminating themselves in the process.

I pleaded, "Please forgive me. I am not in a position to oblige you. I partially fathomed the mighty ocean called Baba from the waves of love that rise from your heart. It is beyond me to understand Baba, the Truth, nor am I capable of expressing in writing the different facets of the divine life of Baba. I will have to rely on the wave to bring out in proper focus the glory and grandeur of the ocean. I will be failing in my duty if I omit your name and simply mention a 'devotee'. I beseech you to relent. Enable me to share with the world the joy I experienced in your company."

"Baba enjoined me not to indulge in self-publicity. I have been following the same with rigorous strictness. If Baba now feels that restriction may be relaxed for your sake, how can I help it? If in the evening of my life, Baba has willed that I must be made known to the outside world by you and, because of that publicity, people must be blessed with his Grace, I have no other alternative except to meekly submit to it. I am but a child in the lap of Baba," Rege responded.

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Baba the enigma eluded me in the *samadhi*, in the statue and in the portrait. But I recognised him distinctly in Rege's utterances, in his unfathomable love, in his blemishless character, in his genuine simplicity and humility, in his self-effacing nature.

* * *

As Rege took his leave of us, I noticed that he had come barefoot to the bus stand.

"Sir, why do you walk on this thorny and stony path without chappals?" I ventured.

What he said in reply was yet one more proof of his great veneration for Baba. "I never wear chappals or shoes the moment I set foot on the holy soil of Shirdi. This is a practice I have been following for the last fifty years. This earth is sanctified by Baba treading on it. How can I defile it by walking with my chappals on?"

We looked at our feet and hung our heads in shame.

I watched Rege walk back to his quarters with measured steps, in the company of his daughter, Shanta. A perfect picture of peace and poise, keeping aloft the torch of truth and wisdom, ever dispelling darkness and doom, he moved like a mobile lighthouse spreading the light of Baba's message all round.

With tears of joy and with mingled emotions I saw him turn the corner and finally disappear from our view.

Like the immortal Baba, who has vanished from our view but is still alive in our thoughts, Rege (who is no more with us) will be enshrined forever in the temple of our hearts.

'Sri Samartha Sadguru Sainath Maharajjiki jai.'

A member of our party set the mood and tempo for the onward journey.

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Kamakoti Seshadri Swamigal

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Kamakoti Seshadri Swamigal

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He was an unexpected visitor, in a sense unusual too. His grey hair was dishevelled, his beard straggling. His broad careworn forehead was prominent, with an auspicious mark of vermilion on it. His shrunken eyes were reddish, probably due to lack of sleep the previous night. I could not guess if his dirty dhoti betrayed his poverty or proclaimed his simplicity. I noticed a couple of crutches on the floor when I came in to receive him. Overtaken by spontaneous sympathy, I sat by his side.

"You are....?" He set the conversation in motion.

"Yes... What can I do for you?" I asked him.

"I belong to Thiruvannamalai*. My name is Arunachalam. I have come from Sri Seshadri Swamigal's ashram."

"Oh, I see." From my blank facial expression, he guessed correctly and asked with evident surprise, "Have you not heard about Seshadri Swamigal?"

"No, I am hearing this name for the first time. I know of only Ramanashramam in Thiruvannamalai."

"Seshadri Swamigal's *samadhi* is situated just east of Ramanashramam. Didn't anyone inform you about this ashram when you were at Ramanashramam?"

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*Thiruvannamalai = Thiru Annamalai: A town in Thiruvannamalai Sambuvarayar District in Tamil Nadu, about 200 km from Madras. It is also known as Arunachalam.

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"I haven't been to Ramanashramam. In fact, I have not even been to Thiruvannamalai. Ten years ago, I passed through the town on my way to Sathanur Anicut. And that's it."

"In that case, you must visit Thiruvannamalai in the near future and have *darshan* of Arunachaleswara. You must also avail yourself of the opportunity to visit Seshadri Swamigal's *adhisthanam (samadhi)*. This is his birth centenary year (1970). The world should know about this great soul. I was fortunate to have been entrusted with the task of performing the daily pooja at the holy *samadhi*."

I promised I would come before long, but sought more information: "Have you seen Seshadri Swamigal in person?"

"Certainly. I was born and grew up in Thiruvannamalai. My marriage took place when I was 14. I distinctly remember his presence at my marriage."

"Where did the Swamigal stay at Thiruvannamalai? Is it where the ashram is now?"

"No, no. The ashram sprang up after he passed away. The Swamiji would never stay in one particular place. He was always a wandering recluse. He would be in a temple or on top of a heap of garbage. He would saunter by the market place, then rest on a heap of refuse for a while. He would squat in a corner, then suddenly get up and rush somewhere. He would not bathe or sleep. His clothes were usually dirty and torn."

"Did he look like a person off his head?"

"Yes. He appeared to be insane and spoke incoherently. But everyone recognised him as a noble spirit. Whatever he uttered was prophecy. He would know all that happened even in distant places. He had pre-vision too.

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He would easily guess what passed in your mind. Everyone wanted his holy feet to grace his house."

"Was your house ever blessed by a visit from him?"

"He came once. We entreated him to have lunch with us. He agreed and lunch was served. He mixed everything — rice, dhal, *sambar* and side dishes — that was his habit. He prepared three balls from the mixture but did not eat them. Instead, he threw them in all directions. My father asked him 'Why do you do this, Swami?' And he replied, 'There are *bhoothaganas* in that direction. This side you have animals, birds and insects. Won't they feel hungry? That is why I fed them.' He wiped his hands on his dhoti and hurried out of the house."

"What did he look like? Was he very tall?"

"He was neither tall nor short. He was very fair. He spoke like a child. It was really fun listening to him because he was repetitious in his utterances."

"Did he belong to Thiruvannamalai?"

"No, he was from Kanchipuram. He was well-versed in all our Shastras. He was an ardent and uncompromising devotee of the universal Mother. Goddess Kamakshi, the presiding deity of Kanchipuram, had blessed him in ample measure."

We said our goodbyes, agreeing to meet before long. He called on me after a couple of months to renew his invitation and, this time, I gladly accepted it.

* * *

It was noon when we entered Seshadri Swami's Ashram on Chengam Road. Arunachalam, who was eagerly awaiting our arrival, received us with warmth. I introduced my friend Seshadri and photographer Babu to him.

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After a wash at the well, we offered the fruits and flowers which we had brought with us at the *samadhi* shrine of Seshadri Swami. The sanctum sanctorum was a modest granite structure. We circumambulated the shrine, and prostrated ourselves on the ground in front of the altar. A portrait of the Swami, who had a compassionate and endearing look, hung on the inner wall. Arunachalam's son, Mahadevan, lit the camphor and offered *arathi* on our behalf.

Later, we assembled on a platform under a shady tree. The grand sight of the imposing Annamalai Hill on our right and the silence that reigned all round were soothing and refreshing.

I asked Arunachalam to tell me more about Seshadri Swami.

The Swami would enter a 'hotel' (restaurant) while walking in the market. He would take some food and scatter it in all directions. The proprietor would not protest. Instead, he would gladly welcome such visits, because he was assured of a roaring business that day!

The Swami would enter a shop. He would open the cash box, take some money out of it and scatter it. Much elated, the proprietor would fall at his feet. That day, he was sure to have a more-than-usual turnover.

If he entered a textile shop, the owner would present him with a new dhoti. The very next day the dhoti would be dirtied beyond recognition. Sometimes, the Swami would make a present of the new dhoti to a beggar or he would tear it into lengthy pieces, and tie them together to the tails of calves, and laugh on seeing the frightened animals run for their lives.

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Someone would coerce him to have a shave. But he would manage to extricate himself and run away before the job was finished. He could then be seen wandering around with a partially shaved chin, oblivious of his appearance.

Whatever he predicted would happen. One day, he entered the house of one Tilak Sastri, went straight up to the latter's brother, said "This fellow will be carried away by Yama (the God of Death) next week" and rushed out. And just as the Swami foretold, the young man, who was hale and hearty, died suddenly within a week.

Once, Arunachalam's father was seriously ill. Arunachalam hastened to the Annamalaiyar Temple where Seshadri Swami was sitting and stood before him in prayer. He did not utter a word about his father's condition. Just then, a devotee brought some plantains for the Swami. The Swami took a couple and threw them at Arunachalam, saying, "Take them, take them". Arunachalam considered them as sacred *prasadam*, took them home and gave them to his father. The illness abated almost immediately and soon he was perfectly normal.

Bedrolls were always spread for him near the Murugan shrine known as 'Kampathu Ilayanar' in the Annamalaiyar Temple, in the Sadhukkal Matam, and on the *pyal* of Sadachi Achiammal's house. Exhausted after his wanderings, the Swami would rest in one of these places. If he felt like it, he would eat any food offered. If he had no mind for it, he would go without food for several days. He would keep with him rotten fruit and spoilt *sambar* and consume them at leisure, eating them with great relish. The awful smell emanating from them would drive away onlookers.

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Seshadri Swami passed away in 1929. When his body was interred, Ramana Maharishi stayed at the spot till the rituals were over.

* * *

Seshadri Swami came to Thiruvannamalai from Kanchipuram, one of the holy towns of India. Since Goddess Kamakshi is the presiding deity of the Kamakoti Peetam, this place is considered the seat of the Sri Vidya cult — the worship of the Sakthi aspect of the universal force.

Great souls come to Kanchi in search of Kamakshi's grace. But the Universal Mother herself went to Thiruvannamalai to seek her Lord's grace.

This is the story. Goddess Parvathi worshipped Lord Ekambaranatha in the form of a lingam fashioned out of sand on the banks of the Kampa river in Kanchipuram, and later left for Thiruvannamalai at the latter's bidding, where she performed prolonged austerities, got rid of her curse, and finally merged with the Lord, who gave her an honoured place on his left side.

This is a Puranic episode. Seshadri Swami, who was the darling child of Kamakshi Devi, who showered her grace on him in abundant measure, went to Thiruvannamalai and merged with the Eternal Light of which the great hill stands as a glorious symbol. His story begins hundreds of years ago.

Adi Sankaracharya, who shone as the beacon light of our ancient *Veda Dharma*, and who spread the spiritual lustre of our land far and wide, came to Kanchi to preserve our Vedic lore and to uphold the truth of Advaita Vedanta. He established a monastery there and taught the mystic import of the cult of Sri Vidya and the secrets

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enshrined in the mantras and tantras, to many a disciple. He created a wealth of literature regarding the different aspects of Devi worship.

Adi Sankaracharya then brought some Brahmin families from the banks of the river Narmada in the north, to perform the regular worship of Kamakshi Devi. He settled them in Kanchi. They were known as 'Kamakotiyar'.

The descendants of the Kamakotiyar were ardent devotees of Kamakshi Devi. They studied the Vedas and attained great proficiency in them. They acquired knowledge about our ancient spiritual lore and Puranic literature. In time, the number of such families gradually dwindled, and hardly four or five of them remained. In spite of the unfavourable trends in society, these families swam against the tide and maintained the high moral and spiritual standards set by their ancestors. Some of them excelled in the science of astrology, and were engaged by the authorities of the Sri Varadarajaswami Temple in Vishnu Kanchi (known as Little Kanchipuram) to recite the *Panchangam*.

In the Kamakotiyar lineage, a great man was born in the Ashtasahasram sect about two centuries ago. He was known as Kamakoti Sastriyar. A great exponent of the Devi cult, he mastered all the Shastras even while young. As he was a great Vedic scholar, many persons came to him to get their doubts cleared. He also composed a number of songs in praise of the Devi, Lord Siva and Lord Mahavishnu.

Strictly adhering to the Vedic way of life, and given to pure and austere habits, he led the life of a Maharishi — a hermit of supreme calibre. His residence looked like a hermitage. It was the abode of the gods; there the *Dharma*

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Devata hovered. This great man, who led an exemplary life, was a source of inspiration to those who approached him for guidance and advice. Godliness spread; peace and plenty flourished. Responding to several invitations, he left Kanchi and settled in a tiny village called Vazhur in nearby Wandiwash taluk.

Kamakshi Devi did not bless him with a male heir to continue the family lineage. Seshammal was his only daughter. But he was very attached to his elder brother Chidambara Sastri's children and brought them up as his own. Chidambara Sastri had two sons and two daughters. Of the four, the last girl, Maragatham, was richly endowed with the Devi's grace. She grew up an extremely charming and attractive girl with winning manners and an amiable nature: Kamakoti Sastri developed a special affection for her and paid extra attention to her upbringing. He familiarised her with Puranic stories extolling the virtues of chastity. He taught her music, and he would listen with moistened eyes when she rendered devotional hymns.

When Maragatham came of age, Kamakoti Sastri began a search for a suitable husband for her. Finally he pitched on his own student and disciple, Varadarajan. He approached Varadarajan's father, Seshadri Josiyar, and broached the subject. The horoscopes matched and the alliance was finalised. On an auspicious day, Varadarajan and Maragatham became man and wife.

It was a happy alliance; the couple proved to be an ideal pair. Maragatham attended on her husband with meticulous care. She hosted with uncommon hospitality the learned persons who visited their house to exchange ideas with her husband. She studied the scriptures and Puranic literature along with her husband. Every evening,

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both of them had *darshan* of Lord Varadaraja and Lord Ekambareswara.

Only one thing disturbed their otherwise serene domestic life. They were denied a child to brighten their home and they despaired that they might die without an heir. They made vows and observed the recommended austerities. They gave alms to the needy and the deserving to wash off their sins, if any. They undertook pilgrimages to holy shrines. They bathed in sacred waters. But it all proved ineffective.

Knowing how worried Varadarajan and Maragatham were, Kamakoti Sastriyar went to Goddess Kamakshi and prayed to her, tears running down his cheeks. "Oh, Mother, are my prayers to you inadequate? If I have defaulted in my life or while worshipping you, punish me. Please don't take my children to task, I beg of you, Oh! Benevolent Mother of the Universe, Oh, ocean of limitless mercy, please have pity on me, a beggar begging for a child..."

The benevolent goddess appeared in Sastriyar's dream that night and told him, "Give a little butter to the couple. A child of wisdom will be born." The old man woke up the very next moment and shed grateful tears, contemplating the overwhelming mercy of the Devi.

The next morning, he divulged his dream to the couple. They fell at Sastriyar's feet, with tears of joy and prayers to Kamakshi Devi. Sastriyar took some butter, offered it first to the Devi, uttered some incantations and then gave it to Varadarajan and Maragatham. They swallowed the holy *prasad*.

Is there a more powerful medicine than divine *prasad?* Maragatham conceived in due course. Her relatives were elated. The functions and rituals to be performed when a

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woman is pregnant were gone through according to tradition. Her friends bedecked Maragatham with flowers and sang merrily. And she went into raptures.

On January 22, 1870, with the planetary positions favourable, Maragatham gave birth to a male child. It was Saturday and the star was Hastha. The child was named Seshadri, and greatness was predicted for him.

Being the gift of Parasakthi, the Universal Mother, divine thoughts and divine worship came naturally to him from infancy. When he was taken to temples, he would, while sitting comfortably on his mother's hip, salute the Lord with his two small hands, like an adult devotee. He would listen intently to his mother while she rendered divine hymns and he developed a taste for music. As a toddler, he lisped the many hymns his mother taught him.

Varadarajan's joy knew no bounds. He, who once pined for a child, now wondered by what meritorious deeds he deserved so precocious a son. He would teach his students with Seshadri on his lap and the child would listen to his father's Vedantic lessons, totally absorbed by them.

He saw his father quite often sitting still, with his eyes closed, in meditative posture. And he would imitate him. Those who saw the child sitting motionless with *chinmudra* (like Dakshinamurthi), as if in *tapas*, were wonder-struck.

When he was four years old, he was taken by his mother to the annual festival of the Lord Varadarajaswami Temple. There, a vendor was offering for sale small Balakrishna idols. Seshadri pleaded with his mother to buy one for him, but she was too preoccupied to hear him, much less oblige him. But the vendor was allured by the charm of the child. "Madam," he drew her attention, "your son really resembles the god-child Krishna. He is

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eager to have an idol. Let him have one." He then invited little Seshadri to choose an idol. Overjoyed by the offer, Seshadri selected a beautiful idol, for which Maragatham offered to pay. But the vendor would not accept payment.

Wonder of wonders! The hundreds of idols he had brought to the festival were sold by evening.

The next day, when the vendor saw Maragatham with Seshadri near the temple, he fell at her feet, bubbling with gratitude. Maragatham was perplexed by his behaviour. "Why do you fall at my feet? What has happened?" she asked.

The vendor emotionally replied, "Oh, Mother, your son is no ordinary child. He is a lucky one. Because he touched an idol yesterday, all my stock was sold. I have been to many temple festivals with my wares, but I would hardly sell a hundred. Yesterday, I sold nearly a thousand ... His is a golden hand. His is a golden hand." Grasping the tiny hand, he pressed it to his eyes, then kissed it profusely. The child blinked enquiringly, while his mother beamed with elation.

The news spread all over the town and earned the child the name 'Golden-hand Seshadri'. It was this hand that blessed the merchants of Thiruvannamalai later in life. They would anxiously wait for him to arrive at their shops and give a golden touch to whatever they had for sale.

The Krishna idol was placed by Seshadri in his pooja room. After he renounced the world and left his home, his younger brother, Narasimha Josiyar, worshipped it. I had the good fortune to see the idol in Triplicane in Madras in the house of Devakunjari Ammal, Narasimha Josiyar's

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daughter-in-law. How I came to hear about it is another story.

* * *

One day, a person by name Krishnaswami came to my office. He introduced himself as the grandson of Seshadri Swami's aunt (mother's sister). She was popularly known as 'Sundarakka'. Krishnaswami's father was her adopted son.

I asked him if he knew where the late Narasimha Josiyar's family was living at the time. He said he had no idea, but that he would make enquiries and let me know.

A month later, Krishnaswami rang me to say that he had met Devakunjari Ammal accidentally at Seshadri Swami's ashram in Thiruvannamalai where he had gone in connection with the Swami's centenary celebrations (January, 1970). After relating with great enthusiasm his unexpected meeting with her, he gave me her address in Triplicane. He also added that the Krishna idol was in her residence and that she would be very happy if I would come there to see it. (The family has since shifted residence and I am not aware where the idol is at present.)

The exquisitely-shaped idol is less than two inches in height. Its crawling posture is characteristic of a child who has not learnt to stand as yet. It has a ball of butter in its right hand and a cup under its left. It is known as Navaneetha Krishna — Krishna with butter. I fell in love with the idol at first sight. It was very difficult to take my eyes away from his ever-smiling face. The arms and legs were round and shapely. His necklace, his bangles, his ear lobes, the ornamental chain around his waist, every-

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thing was attractive. From whatever angle I saw it, it was an idol of captivating beauty.

I saw young Seshadri superimposed on that tiny Krishna idol. The divine child with the butter in his hand symbolised pure wisdom. Seshadri, who was born by the grace of Kamakshi, who had said to Kamakoti Sastriyar in his dream "You feed them butter and a child of rare wisdom will be born", was no different from Krishna.

* * *

In his fifth year, the formal function to start his education was gone through by his parents. Kamakoti Sastriyar wrote the mantra of Saraswathi, the Goddess of Learning, on the child's tongue with *darbha* grass, and uttered the five-lettered name of Lord Siva and the eight-lettered name of Lord Narayana in his ears. Educating him was no problem at all. He mastered the Sanskrit language without effort. He acquired a proficiency in poetry and drama much beyond his age. He developed a rare taste for Tamil literature also and studied *Kamba Ramayanam, Thirukkural, Nannool* and *Naidadam.* At home, he practised music under his mother's guidance.

When he was seven, Kamakoti Sastriyar had the boy's *upanayanam* performed and he taught him the significance of *Sandhya Vandana* — his daily prayer — and the import of *Gayathri Mantra.* He was admitted in a Veda Patasala — a school for the study of the Vedas. Sastriyar directed Seshadri to come to him for higher Shastric studies and to delve deeper into the secrets of incantations, after equipping himself with logic, grammar, mathematics and astrology.

Seshadri must have been ten or eleven then. As was

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his custom, he went to pay his respects to his father before proceeding to his *patasala*. Varadarajan suddenly became emotional on seeing his son, and embraced him tightly. He became speechless due to a choking sensation and wept like a child. Seshadri was nonplussed. Maragatham, who had come with the boy, stood aghast.

"Why are you upset suddenly and why do you remain mute? Why don't you speak your mind to me at least?" asked an agitated Maragatham. Varadarajan sobbed, "I am unable to express myself clearly. Just as I was thinking about the good reports I hear about Seshadri, he came to do *namaskar*. My elation gushed forth as tears of joy. That's all."

After Seshadri had left for school, Varadarajan drew his wife near and spoke to her in a low voice.

"By the benign grace of Goddess Kamakshi, you became my wife. By your sincere and faithful devotion to me, you have made me immensely happy. It is my good fortune that you gave me a son like Seshadri. But I am being denied the pleasure of seeing him live with glory and honour. Devi has served an urgent summons for me. I am taking my leave of you as I am bound to quit my earthly existence before dawn tomorrow. You stay for many more years and join me after seeing our son lead a praiseworthy life."

Maragatham's head reeled and she swooned and fell on the floor. Varadarajan sprinkled water on her face and, when she came to, said consolingly, "Maragatham, I never knew you were so weak-hearted. Intelligent and practical-minded as you are, I expected you to face the situation boldly and resolutely. What is the use of worrying? What is destined to happen, shall happen."

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Throughout the day Varadarajan spent his time in the Kamakshi and Ekambareswarar shrines, meditating and worshipping. He came home late and retired, foregoing his dinner.

At midnight there was a noticeable setback in his health and his pulse rate dropped suddenly. Seshadri wept unceasingly. His father embraced him and said, "My dear son, God has been kind to grant me a peaceful end. I die with my mental faculties intact. Such a death is rare even among yogis. I am grateful to God for this mercy. Console yourself and be courageous. I see the Lord of Death waiting impatiently. Till I go with him, I would like to engage myself in meditation because time is very precious now. As a parting message to you, I remind you that however much you might study, only personal experience counts ultimately. Knowledge culled from your experience and realisation is the highest you can aspire for in life. Never forget it." So saying, he closed his eyes and settled into deep meditation.

After Varadarajan breathed his last, Maragatham felt that she had lost everything in the world! Life was a terrible vacuum. She could not sleep during the night. When she dozed off due to sheer exhaustion, her husband would appear in her dreams, sit by her side and talk to her lovingly. It was all so real as long as it lasted. When she awoke, the delusion would vanish and her heartbreak would worsen.

Maragatham ate less as the days passed. Most of the time she was absorbed in the contemplation of God or in uttering the name of the Lord. She was in perpetual tears, and her sons Seshadri and Narasimhan were a source of solace only to some extent. She would hug them and

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experience fleeting bliss. The next moment, she would grieve that her husband was not there to feel proud of their achievements.

Maragatham's pitiable widowhood and her loneliness moved even Kamakoti Sastriyar, wise, detached old man that he was. Deciding that a change of place would give his niece some mental peace, he asked her and her two sons to join him in Vazhur. The peace and tranquillity of that hamlet gave Maragatham much-needed solace.

Seshadri, who was 14 then, was taught the Upanishads, *Brahma Sutras* and *Bhagavad Gita* by his grandfather. He was initiated into the secrets of important mantras. Philosophic doctrines were explained to him. Kamakoti Sastriyar passed on all he knew to Seshadri so that he would carry the torch of wisdom to the next generation. From light, light was lit.

By his 15th year, Seshadri had mastered all the Puranas. When the Tahsildar at Wandiwash expressed a desire that the *Ramayanam* should be read out to him in full, Kamakoti Sastri deputed Seshadri, who read each and every *sloka* and explained it in full to the great astonishment of everyone assembled.

Kamakoti Sastri was nearing 90 and age had begun to tell on his health. Most of the time, he was confined to bed and his movements were gradually restricted. In due course, the Vazhur establishment was wound up, and they all came back and settled in Kanchipuram.

Within a few days of his arrival, Sastriyar knew that his end was nearing. He wanted to renounce the worldly life and take to *apath sanyasa* before his death. He went to the Upanishad Brahmendra Mutt in Kanchi. The presiding pontiff, Sri Krishnananda Saraswathi Swami, gave

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him the order of *sanyasa* and named him Brahmananda Saraswathi.

After taking to the holy order and donning ochre robes, Kamakoti Sastriyar (now Brahmananda Saraswathi), retired to the Chakrattazhwar shrine in the Varadarajaswami Temple. Maragatham and her sons visited him daily and fed him.

Seshadri's aunt (Varadarajan's sister) Venkatalakshmi and her husband Sundaram Iyer lived in Damal, eight miles west of Kanchipuram. Sundaram Iyer's brother, Parasurama Sastrigal, came to Kanchipuram and took Brahmananda Saraswathi to Damal, where he passed away after about ten days. He was interred on the banks of the Sarpa Nadi, now known as the 'Paambu Canal'!

* * *

I went to Damal to have *darshan* at the *samadhi* of the great soul. But I could not locate the exact spot. Even the old residents of the place were not certain about its location. The village officer showed me a spot on the right bank of the Paambu Canal and said, "Once we saw a *samadhi* structure here. But the person who purchased this plot demolished the superstructure. If you dig, probably you may find some sort of brick and mortar construction." No relative of Seshadri Swami now lives in Damal. One or two persons I contacted confirmed that some relatives of the Swami were said to have lived in the village till some years ago. They pointed to a couple of dilapidated tiled houses and said, "We heard that his relatives resided there once".

I went to Vazhur, where Kamakoti Sastriyar had stayed for some time. You have to turn east two miles before

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Wandiwash, as you travel from Kanchipuram to Wandiwash (known as Vandavasi) and proceed about four miles to reach this peaceful and out-of-the-way village. There was a small tank and a neglected Perumal temple adjoining it. It was in a shambles and daily worship had long been suspended. The idol of Mahavishnu, however, was intact. Brahmapureswarar was enshrined in another temple, a little further away. It was being looked after with care by the local residents.

South of the Vishnu temple, the *agraharam* had flourished once. Now there was only a vast open ground. Kamakoti Sastriyar must have lived in a house on this street.

Maragatham and her children were left to the care of Ramaswami Josiyar (Varadarajan's brother) and his wife Kalyani in Kanchipuram after the death of Sastriyar.

From the time her husband had died, Maragatham had gradually reduced her intake of food and hours of sleep. After Kamakoti Sastriyar's death, she almost gave up food. She spent hours in meditation and prayer.

Seshadri, who was 16, would sing to her the divine hymns she had taught him in his infancy. Sometimes they would sing together. She would ask him to chant the Veda mantras and discussed with him the religious texts.

Maragatham was thinning away physically and weakening mentally. She knew that she would not live long and wanted to celebrate Seshadri's marriage before she died. But she hesitated to express her wish openly.

Seshadri's aunt Vengalakshmi, who lived in Damal, had a daughter by name Gagini and was very eager to give her in marriage to Seshadri. She was also aware that Varadarajan had desired such an alliance. She came to

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Kanchipuram, and broached the topic with her elder brother, Ramaswami Josiyar. But he discouraged her and nipped the proposal in the bud.

"Why do you say so?" asked Vengalakshmi.

"Vengu, I have gone through Seshadri's horoscope in detail. According to the planetary positions, he is destined to be a recluse. Marriage and family life are denied him. Hence, you should turn your attention elsewhere and seek some other alliance for Gagini." Vengalakshmi was startled by the revelation. But she was happy that her brother had spoken the truth so candidly. To Maragatham, who happened to overhear this discussion between brother and sister, it was a blow.

When he returned from the temple, Seshadri saw his mother in bed in a dazed condition and asked her, "Is anything wrong with your health, Mother?"

"My dear child, my life is shattered beyond repair. I wanted to see you get married. Even that hope has been shattered." When Seshadri learnt of his uncle's prediction, he was sad that the latter had chosen to be so outspoken about it.

Within ten days, Gagini's marriage was celebrated in Damal with Venkataramanan of Tiruppattur in North Arcot District. But none attended the marriage from Kanchipuram!

Maragatham was preparing for her final exit. How could she live to see her extraordinary son become an anchorite in his youth?

She soon became a physical and mental wreck and was confined to bed. She refused to take any medicine.

On the most auspicious day of Ekadasi, Maragatham signalled to Seshadri to come near and embraced him.

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Both sang Kamakoti Sastri's famous song *Amba Siva* melodiously and emotionally. Then she repeated three times the famous stanzas *Sat Sangatve Nissangatvam* from Adi Sankara's *Bhajagovindam,* which emphasise that the company of the great and the holy leads the believer by stages to detachment, realisation and complete deliverance. After that she placed her hand on her son's heart and uttered three times the Sanskrit *sloka* which proclaims that spiritual realisation and emancipation of the soul are assured if the person has a glimpse of Chidambaram, is lucky to be born in Thiruvarur, has the good fortune to die in Benares and merely conjures the thoughts of Thiruvannamalai in his mind. Maragatham murmured "Arunachala, Arunachala, Arunachala" and the Gates of Heaven were already open for her.

Seshadri held his mother's body to his chest. Even though he practised complete detachment, at this moment he lost control of himself, broke down completely and cried aloud.

* * *

Their uncle Ramaswami Josiyar and aunt Kalyani took charge of the boys, Seshadri and Narasimhan, bestowing on them all their affection and love. They tried their best to see that the boys never felt the absence of their parents. But Seshadri could neither develop any attachment for them nor to family life. What his mother impressed on him on her death bed, about the noble aim of life — the realisation of the ultimate truth — obsessed him. The call of Arunachala was insistent and irresistible.

To overcome the depression he felt, Seshadri locked himself in the pooja room most of the time. Here, in

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addition to the portraits of Kamakshi Devi and Sri Rama, there was a sketch of Arunachala Hill by Seshadri. He had not seen the hill; but what he had heard from his mother had made so much of an impression that he was able to make a realistic sketch of the Hill.

Entering the pooja room at 5 a.m., he would remain there till 1 or 2 p.m. He was heard to repeat aloud the names 'Arunachalesa', 'Sonadrinatha'. Sometimes he would keep up all night, repeating *Durga Suktham* or hymns of Devi. He never bothered about food or sleep. His uncle and aunt were upset on this score. "Dear Seshu, if you starve yourself, forego your sleep and indulge in continuous prayer, you may affect your health. Please listen to us. This is too much for your age. You must be more extroverted," they pleaded with him day in and day out.

As taboos and restrictions increased at home, Seshadri resorted to going to temples. During the day, he frequented the Chakrattazhwar shrine at the Varadarajaswami Temple; his evenings were spent at the Kamakshi Temple. He would circumambulate the deity till he became tired. He would sit before the Divine Mother and repeat *Mookapanchasati slokas* or he would ceaselessly perform *namaskar* to the Devi.

Sometimes he would not come home for two days at a time. Ramaswami Josiyar would go out in search of him, and would find him on the *pyal* of a house or in the temple *mantapam*. He would plead with him and bring him home. Seshadri would behave himself for a couple of days thereafter and stay at home. On the third day, he would go out again.

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The women of the town wept when they saw Seshadri wandering about like a deranged person, wearing dirty clothes, unkempt and unoiled hair, a ragged beard, a patch of vermilion on his forehead, mumbling something or other all the time.

Friends and relatives were always complaining about Seshadri to Ramaswami Josiyar.

A visibly upset relative complained, "His behaviour is worsening day by day. He falls at the feet of everyone he comes across. He keeps on saluting the Sun with folded hands. Like a water-crow he takes dips in the tank several times a day. If you question him, he just laughs loudly. He never seems to stop blabbering to himself. I am really ashamed to talk about his antics in the temple."

An urchin came running to Ramaswami Josiyar's house one day. "Uncle, come and see for yourself. Seshu is removing the rubbish from the streets to clean the path for the procession of Varadarajaswami. He is talking aloud to himself. Everybody is making fun of him." Ramaswami Josiyar felt miserable that the boy who should have been a rare and dignified member of society had become an object of derision.

But just then a family friend came and said, "Day before yesterday, I found him in the *mantapam* in the Ekambareswarar Temple, absorbed in meditation. I asked, 'What are you doing here Seshu?' He replied, 'I am doing *japa* to cleanse myself of actions done in my previous birth' and then started explaining the meaning of the mantra. He wanted me also to learn it and recite it so that I would be free from the effects of my karma. He spoke coherently and intelligently. I don't think he is mad. He is wise beyond his age. Nothing is wrong with him."

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After some time, Seshadri stopped visiting temples to perform *japa*. He stayed in the house till evening and then went out. He would return only the next morning. No one knew where and how he spent the night. His uncle grew anxious and when he enquired about it, Seshadri just laughed it away.

After ten days, the mystery was unravelled. Seshadri chose to spend his nights at the burning ghats, seeking solitude and silence. When Ramaswami came to know this, he pleaded, "My dear son, don't go to the cremation grounds. Why do you perform *japa* on defiled ground? Do it either in the temple or at home."

Seshadri laughed heartily. "Oh! Is it defiled ground? No it is *Rudra Bhoomi*. If you do *japa* there, God will answer your prayers immediately. A single *japa* done there is more potent than a thousand done elsewhere."

Ramaswami was angered by this utterance. He put Seshadri in a room and bolted it securely.

Seshadri said nothing and sat in deep meditation. He refused to come out and remained without food or water.

Ramaswami became agitated over Seshadri's fasting and satyagraha. He was worried that if Seshadri died of starvation, he would be responsible. He decided to free him, whatever the consequences. Seshadri resumed his visits to the cremation grounds and performed more severe and strenuous observances, impairing his health in the process. But the inner light shone brighter and was reflected in his face. The village wondered at this unique transformation.

* * *

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It was a Saturday. The members of the family usually had their oil bath on that day. It was ten a.m. Seshadri had not yet returned from the burning ghats. Ramaswami Josiyar was fretting and fuming and pacing like a caged tiger. He didn't know what to do. Finally he decided not to have his oil bath as a protest against his nephew's waywardness, and sat in a corner under protest.

Seshadri came home an hour later. It was he who invariably applied oil on his uncle before his bath. So, he took the oil bowl and approached his uncle. The latter would not even turn towards him.

"Seshu, your uncle will not be having his oil bath today," Kalyani Ammal said.

"Why, aunt?" enquired Seshadri.

"He is upset about your behaviour. He complains that you disregard his words of advice."

"Oh, my God! Why should he be angry with me? I am in my true and original state. If each of us confines himself to his true state and minds his own business, there won't be any ill feeling at all," said Seshadri in good humour and, going near his uncle, asked him affectionately, "Are you angry with me, uncle?" Then, without waiting for his reply, he applied the oil on his uncle's head, rubbing hard.

Suddenly he suspended the operation, ran to the courtyard, and gazed at the sky for a second before returning to the hall.

"What did you observe in the sky?" asked Ramaswami.

"Nothing in particular. I heard the *devas* singing in the sky as they passed by. I just went to see, that is all," Seshadri said casually and resumed his rubbing, this time tapping Ramaswami's head in a jovial mood.

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Ramaswami, fully convinced that Seshadri was talking nonsense, asked him derisively, "You saw only *devas*? Did you not see any *gandharvas*?"

"Of course, I saw *gandharvas* also in the company of the *devas*. Some had wings too. They are extraordinarily attractive. Their songs were very sweet to hear."

"What was the raga they were singing?"

"Bilahari...simply ear-filling."

Ramaswami laughed sarcastically. "You are off your head. If they sang, how is it that you alone heard them? Why didn't we hear them?"

Seshadri smiled. "Uncle, those who are attached to family life and are caught in the mire of worldly pleasures cannot hear such things. Only a person who has renounced everything and remains a free and unfettered soul can hear them," Seshadri explained and went out again.

Ramaswami told his friends the news of Seshadri having heard the song of the *gandharvas* and they spread it. And, soon, Seshadri's mental aberrations became the talk of the town.

Each had his own explanation for Seshadri's mental condition. Some who felt that he would be normal again if he got married, accused Ramaswami of being responsible for the boy's continued bachelorhood. They said the boy's fate would have been different had he not interfered in the proposed alliance and stopped the marriage with his niece Gagini. Some close relatives pressed him to fix an alliance for Seshadri as early as possible.

Ramaswami Josiyar, who felt hurt by such remarks, decided to arrange his nephew's marriage and began searching of a suitable bride. But he met with disappoint-

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ment wherever he went. Who would risk an alliance with a boy of unsound mind, who frequented cremation grounds?

Ramaswami disclosed his mental torture and discomfiture to his nephew one day. Seshadri solaced him thus:

"My dear uncle, why do you bother so much about me. Scandalmongers have nothing better to do. I have no interest in marriage. You helped me a great deal by speaking frankly about the nature of my horoscope to your sister! Don't trouble yourself about my marriage because others prod you. If you compel me to marry, I will stop coming home. In fact, I will run away from Kanchipuram."

Greatly perturbed by this declaration of Seshadri's, Kalyani Ammal pleaded with him, "Seshu, please don't talk like this any more. I am not able to bear such shocks. I assure you that the topic of your marriage will not be discussed in this house hereafter. You need not get married. It is enough if you stay with us. Your mother asked me to take care of you. We will. If you leave us, I will not live long."

After this incident, the subject of Seshadri's marriage became taboo in the house.

One day, Parasurama Sastri came from Damal and spoke to Seshadri with a view to changing his ideas and behaviour. "Dear Seshu, I fully appreciate and admire your devotion and *japas*. But frequenting the burning ghats is wrong and is prohibited in the Shastras. Please stop those visits."

Seshadri insisted that what he did was in order. They discussed the subject in Sanskrit threadbare for over three hours. Finally Seshadri said, "I am a strict *brahmachari* and an *upasaka*. An *upasaka* has no restrictions or

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inhibitions as to the time and place of *japa* etc." He was so forthright and authoritative in his assertion that Parasurama Sastri had no convincing arguments left to offer. This infuriated him and he snapped, "Whatever you might say, you should not come home after visiting the burning ghats every day. This is highly objectionable, according to Shastric injunctions."

"If that is so, I will leave now. I shall never again step into this house," Seshadri said and walked out. Thereafter he stayed in temples, on tank bunds or under shady trees. He stopped coming to his uncle's house.

* * *

At that time, a yogi by name Balaji Swami was staying with four of his disciples in the Viswanatha shrine on the bank of the large tank called Sarva Theertha. Seshadri went to see him. He saw the Swamiji give *darshan* to those who had assembled there, and became emotionally involved. He fell at his feet and began reciting *Dhakshinamurthi Ashtakam*, the hymn of eight stanzas composed by Adi Sankaracharya. Balaji Swamiji saw the young *upasaka* shedding tears and said in a low voice, in Sanskrit, "Don't worry, my child. Sit here quietly."

Like one in a trance, Seshadri sat before him and, that moment, surrendered himself totally. He became Balaji Swami's fifth disciple.

Pattanna, one of the disciples, became Seshadri's close friend. One fine morning, both of them approached their Master and expressed their desire to get verbal initiation. The Swamiji gave the mantra of the Divine Mother as *upadesa* to Pattanna. Observing Seshadri's unwavering detachment, he found him fit for a life of spiritual renun-

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ciation — *jnana sanyasa* — and gave him the holy orders by giving him the *upadesa* of *maha vakyas* — the potent pronouncements of the Upanishads.

Seshadri, who was already a sanyasi by mental conviction, now donned the ochre robes and became an anchorite in appearance also. Having renounced worldly pleasures and freed himself from the shackles of family life, he now enjoyed permanent peace and eternal bliss. He became a wandering monk, looking abnormal by mundane standards and dubbed as eccentric by the ignorant.

* * *

It was the day of the annual ceremony of Seshadri's father. Kalyani Ammal was very particular that the son should take part in the rituals. She pleaded with her husband to search for Seshadri and bring him home. Ramaswami Josiyar went in search of Seshadri, found him on a street, caught him, tied him up, and brought him home with the help of some friends. The entire town treated this scene as entertainment.

Seshadri kept protesting throughout that, being a sanyasi, he had no karmas to perform. A sanyasi is not qualified to take part in ceremonial rituals, he kept repeating.

Ramaswami thundered, "I don't care for all this rubbish. It is your aunt's order. You must not leave the house today. I will not let you go." He then put him inside a room, closed the doors, locked them from without, and tied the key to his dhoti for safety.

Two hours later, most of the ceremony was over. All that remained was for Seshadri to receive the blessings of

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his forefathers. The priests called for Seshadri. Ramaswami Josiyar opened the door and went in to untie Seshadri, but, lo! Seshadri was not there!

Seshadri, the *yoga siddha*, had disappeared from the locked room!

The news of Seshadri's incredible disappearance spread throughout the town before evening. Ramaswami Josiyar and Kalyani Ammal wept that they had behaved so callously towards one endowed with such rare powers.

When I read about this unique event in Seshadri's biography, I felt an urge to locate the house from which he had escaped, because it had been left unidentified by his biographer. I went to Kanchipuram, but all my efforts proved futile. In despair, I sought the guidance of the sage of Kanchi, as I was confident of his unfailing blessings. He referred me to one Ranganathan who lived near the Upanishad Brahmendra Mutt in Big Kanchipuram. He belonged to the same Brahmin sect as Seshadri Swami, namely Ashtasahasram. When I sought his help, he said he was not aware of the exact house, but had heard from his parents that the house was somewhere in Yanaikatti Street in Little Kanchipuram.

That brought me to Vishnu Kanchi. Detailed enquiries made with a few old residents helped me to locate the house in a street south of the Varadarajaswami Temple. This street was an extension of Yanaikatti Street and was called South Mada Street. Two houses, with door numbers 6 and 7, were identified as those once belonging to the families of Seshadri Swami. Finally, with the help of a mason over ninety years old, who had helped to rebuild the houses, I could confirm that No.6 South Mada Street was indeed the house in which Seshadri lived with his

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uncle and from which he had mysteriously disappeared on the day of his father's annual ceremony.

* * *

All search parties sent after Seshadri returned unsuccessful. The Ramaswamis blamed themselves for their nephew's flight from home.

Some days later, news reached them that Seshadri Swami was seen in Kaveripakkam, 20 miles west of Kanchipuram. Seshadri's aunt Sundarakka and some other distant relatives lived there. But Seshadri Swami did not meet any of them. He stayed at the Mukteswara Temple, where his cousin Seshu saw him and carried the news home. Everyone hurried thither and was shocked to see his heart-rending condition. They pleaded with him to come home; but he would not leave the temple, so they took food to him there daily.

One day, while he was circumambulating the temple with one of his cousins, a cobra emerged from under a tree and hissed at them. The cousin shouted, "Oh, brother, beware of the snake". Seshadri Swami, not in the least perturbed, spoke to the reptile and got it to come near him. Just as a child would respond to the call of its mother, the reptile slid towards him, climbed up his body, coiled itself comfortably around his neck, and spread its hood above his head like an umbrella.

His cousin ran out shouting, "A snake has bitten Seshu brother!"

A huge crowd gathered in the temple and saw Seshadri Swami with the snake around his neck. After a while, the snake slowly slid down and quickly disappeared into a nearby hole.

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Alankaravalli is the name of the divine consort in this temple. Seshadri Swami was believed to have had her *darshan* and obtained her blessings through austere penance.

* * *

Ramaswami Josiyar and Kalyani Ammal, having heard about Seshadri Swami's whereabouts, came to Kaveripakkam. They found their nephew in deep *samadhi* and waited near him till he opened his eyes. When Seshadri Swami opened his eyes, he recognised his uncle and aunt among the onlookers, but did not betray the fact that he knew them. Ramaswami Josiyar cried out like one possessed and fell at the Swami's feet. "Seshu, please forgive us. Don't desert us," he pleaded. Kalyani Ammal also broke down and added her pleas. "Seshu, is it to see you in this pitiable condition that your mother entrusted you to our care? What a tragedy that you, who should be living like a prince, are roaming about like an uncared for beggar. Please change your mind and come to Kanchipuram with us."

Seshadri Swami just smiled and explained to them patiently that family and domestic joys were things of the past as far as he was concerned. Comforting them with soothing words, he requested them to leave him in peace and solitude.

But they would not give up easily and continued to remonstrate with him to return to a worldly life.

Realising that words would not convince his uncle and aunt, Seshadri Swami relapsed into total silence. And, finally, his aunt and uncle gave up all hope and left for Kanchipuram.

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In the days that followed, crowds flocked to Kaveripakkam to have the *darshan* of the young Swami. Disturbed by the crowd, he suddenly left Kaveripakkam one morning.

Three months later, he was seen at Chengalpattu. Those who sought him there were told he had gone to Wandiwash. When they went to Wandiwash, a local would say, "I saw him in the temple this morning, but I don't know where he has gone now!" Thus, Seshadri Swami was making his presence felt in many places simultaneously by his yogic powers.

Some time later, he was seen observing silence in Thindivanam, a town in South Arcot District. If he had to convey anything important to anyone, he wrote it out. He was referred to as 'Mouna Swami', the silent saint.

He sought the help of a locally influential person to procure a safe and peaceful place to carry on his meditation. He was offered the *yagasaala* in the local Thindrineswarar Temple. He asked the priest to lock him up in that chamber and not open it for a month.

But even before the first week was over, the priest became worried; if the Swami were to die in the course of his self-imposed ordeal, not only would the sin accrue to him but the temple would also be defiled. He pleaded with the Swami's devotees to remove him somewhere else and opened the room. The Swami was found sitting like a log of wood, totally oblivious of his surroundings. He opened his eyes after half an hour and when he was told about the apprehensions of the priest, he stood up and silently walked out.

All those assembled followed the Swami. He wrote on a paper that "This is going to Thiruvannamalai", and

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showed the message to his followers and walked away fast.

It is not clear where he stayed in the next few months. There was news that he had been seen in Doosi and Mamundur, south of Kanchipuram. But when his admirers rushed there, he was not to be found. Next he was seen in Thiruppattur, in North Arcot District. He stayed for some days in the Muthukumaraswami Temple and the Brahmeswaraswami Temple. Lord Brahma was said to have done his *tapas* at this ancient temple, where the statue of the Goddess Thirupurasundari is an exquisite piece of sculpture.

It was in Thiruppattur that his cousin Gagini, who had been proposed for him as his bride, lived with her husband, one Venkataramana Iyer. Venkataramana Iyer, accidentally meeting him in the temple, persuaded Seshadri Swami to come home. The Swami followed him, but refused to step into the house, choosing to sit on the *pyal*.

His aunt, Venkatalakshmi, entreated him to come in. But he took no notice of her and gazed vacantly at the street, a remote semblance of a smile playing on his lips.

To Gagini this was a horrid experience. Seshadri Swami sat like a total stranger, without any sign of recognising those who were near and dear to him. He did not once turn to look at her.

Food was brought to him. He ate it and stretched himself on the *pyal*. Venkataramana Iyer kept him company. But the next morning, Seshadri Swami was missing again. He had left without Venkataramana Iyer even being aware of his departure.

* * *

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Between Polur and Vellore in North Arcot District, ten miles from Polur, is Sandhavasal, a large village. Three miles to the west of it is Pada Veedu, a tiny village whose presiding deity is Renukambal, an aspect of the Divine Mother. It is an important shrine in South India.

Nature reveals herself here in all her splendour. The evergreen vegetation and the thick groves of coconut, plantain and mango trees bear ample testimony to the fertility of the soil. The bordering hillocks and the flowing streams lend charm to an enchanting landscape. Sage Jamadagni's hermitage was said to have been here, on the banks of the river Kamandal.

Seshadri Swami stayed in Renukambal's shrine for a couple of days, lost in the contemplation of her divine grace. Later, he visited the village of Athuvambadi, about seven miles from Pada Veedu.

Lakshmi Ammal was Seshadri Swami's elder aunt — his father's sister. Her son Venkatarama Sastri was then the village munsif of Athuvambadi. Seshadri did not come to see him. It was by sheer accident that Venkatarama Sastri saw Seshadri passing through the village.

Before reaching Thiruvannamalai from Kanchipuram, Seshadri Swami seems to have visited almost all the villages where his relatives lived. But he never claimed kinship with any of them nor sought their hospitality.

It was when Sastri was having his bath in the local tank called 'Ayakkuttai' that he saw Seshadri walking past. He ran after him and, after repeated requests, got him to come to his house for a cup of milk. Seshadri Swami followed his cousin meekly and waited outside the

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house, while Sastri went in to fetch the milk. But before Sastri could return, Seshadri had left the place!

* * *

I went to Athuvambadi. I found the great grandson of Venkatarama Sastri bathing in the same 'Ayakkuttai' where his great-grandfather had bathed over eighty years ago when he saw Seshadri Swami walking by.

I learnt from the boy that his father, Venkataraman (grandson of Venkatarama Sastri), was the chief revenue official of the village, and that he had gone out on collection duty. I went with the boy to their ancestral home. It remained as it was when Venkatarama Sastri had occupied it ten decades ago. It bore no sign of having been remodelled or reconstructed.

The revenue official returned from his rounds and was pleased to relate the incidents connected with Seshadri Swami's life as narrated to him by his mother and grandmother. I had read that Seshadri Swami had gone to nearby Thurunjikuppam from Athuvambadi and had *darshan* of the 'Sanyasi Parai' there. Venkataraman enlightened me further on this visit.

Over three hundred years ago, a sanyasi from the Chola country started on a pilgrimage for holy Benares. He had a daughter in his previous *ashrama,* that is, when he was a householder. She was a young widow. She pleaded with her father to take her also to Benares. But the sanyasi demurred. He took pains to explain to her that it would bring discredit to his sanyasihood. But she would not listen to him and wept. He who had renounced the world was unable to disregard her emotions and agreed to comply with her request. On their way to Benares, they stopped

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in Thurunjikuppam for a few days. The sanyasi put up a small hermitage for himself on a hillside and a separate hut for his daughter some distance away. There were a number of Brahmin houses in the village at the time and he would visit them every day to beg for his food, which he shared with his daughter. One day, when he went with his begging bowl, no door was opened and he found himself virtually spurned by the householders.

He was returning dejected, thinking that it was God's will that they should go without food that day, when some shepherd boys came up to him and asked, "*Saami*, nobody gave you food today, did they?"

"Yes, my dear boys. All the doors and windows were actually sealed," said the sanyasi quite innocently.

"Do you know the reason, *Saami*? It seems you are having an illegitimate relationship with the Brahmin girl who lives in that hut. Therefore they have decided not to help you. They were discussing it among themselves yesterday and we overheard them," they related.

The upright man was upset beyond expression. He asked the shepherd boys to bring cowdung fuel and twigs. He raised his holy staff and chanted some incantations and the God of Truth appeared as a ball of fire. The next moment, the woman who was the indirect cause for tarnishing the fair name of her father, was consumed by the purifying flames. The place where she was burnt alive is still known as 'Pappathikulam'.

After offering his daughter to the God of Fire, the sanyasi went to a dried up lake nearby. He asked the boys to dig a pit in it. They did as instructed, regarding it as a game. The sanyasi stepped into it and asked the boys to cover the pit with a granite slab found nearby. And they

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did so, treating it as yet another game. Each urchin then left, taking with them a handful of sand from the place, as instructed by the sanyasi. They found to their great astonishment the sand turning into peas and sugar candy.

The sanyasi had attained *Jeeva Samadhi* — the unique experience of being buried alive. The 'Sanyasi Parai' (*parai* means granite slab) still remains there, a reminder to visitors of this tragic story.

During the Tamil month of *Adi* (July-August), the people living around here offer worship to the Sanyasi Parai, and they say that every year, before they return home after worship, there is invariably a heavy downpour, flooding the entire area.

There are no Brahmin families in Thurunjikuppam today. It is said that the descendants through male progeny were eliminated because of their sin of sullying the honour of a great personage.

In the company of a local resident, I went to have *darshan* at the Sanyasi Parai, two miles from the village. It is in the middle of a vast open ground, which looks like the bed of a huge lake. I dared not go near it nor bring myself to touch it.

* * *

Seshadri Swami, after having had *darshan* of this slab, a symbol of truth and purity, proceeded on his way to receive *darshan* from Arunachala — the light of truth and wisdom.

When Seshadri Swami arrived in Thiruvannamalai after his wanderings, he felt completely at home.

The holy name of 'Arunachala', uttered by his mother on her death bed, had been ceaselessly reverberating in

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his thoughts. When he came face to face with the great Hill of Eternal Light which had dominated his mental vision all these years, and which he had sketched from his imagination and kept as an object of worship in his pooja room, he realised his true self. Totally effacing his individuality, he became 'THAT' — the Eternal Self.

It was not difficult for Seshadri Swami to realise that the hill was enshrined in the sanctum sanctorum of the big temple, in the form of Ardhanareswarar — Siva and Parvathi combined in a single figure. He remained ever immersed in the glory of their *darshan*. He would be found in the temple, sitting still like a *Sivalinga*, absorbed in *samadhi*. Suddenly he would get up, walk out of the temple and roam around. He was in a state of supratranscendental wisdom, but ordinary people mistook this for lunacy.

Meanwhile, Kalyani Ammal, who had languished and become a physical wreck, was relieved of her suffering by being taken away to that abode of eternal peace. Her husband, Ramaswami Josiyar, was heart-broken, but when happy tidings came from Venkatarama Sastri that Seshadri was in Thiruvannamalai, he was overjoyed.

The very next day, Ramaswami Josiyar left for Thiruvannamalai together with his nephew Narasimha Josiyar. After much searching, they located Seshadri Swami in a remote street. His clothes and general appearance shocked them and Narasimhan was moved to tears on seeing his brother.

Dirty and torn clothes, dishevelled hair, shrunken cheeks, sunken eyes, emaciated body, all presented a picture of a pitiable, demented person talking to himself and left uncared for by society. Ramaswami hugged him

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in a tight embrace and wept aloud in the street, begging Seshadri Swami to come home. But Seshadri Swami did not react at all. Gazing vacantly into space, he extricated himself from his grasp and moved on unaffected and unconcerned.

Seshadri's uncle and brother refused to give up hope. They stayed on in Thiruvannamalai and followed Seshadri in his wanderings. They pleaded with him every now and then. They moved heaven and earth to drag him out of the mire and to get him to return to family life. But they totally failed against the powerful pull of the hand of destiny and, so, returned to Kanchipuram with a heavy heart.

With their exit, the disturbance from his relatives came to an end. But as his spiritual glory unfolded in due course, the disturbance from the local people increased.

Gradually, they had come to realise that Seshadri Swami was a spiritually evolved personage even if he was eccentric and appeared to be mad. Those who came to scoff remained to pray when they experienced the glory and the greatness of his spirit. They saw method in his madness and found to their great astonishment that many of his seemingly meaningless utterances were, in reality, oracular in their import. Admirers and devotees swelled as instances of his telepathic, clairvoyant and premonitory powers gained currency.

He never established a *mutt*, did not develop an ashram nor proclaimed himself a pontiff, prophet or preacher. He did not evolve a cult or system. Above all, he was not a miracle-monger. He existed as pure knowledge and consciousness, in perfect harmony with his true nature, dwelling in eternal bliss. His spiritual aura and lustre

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influenced those who came to him seeking his blessings, shaped their thoughts, evolved them spiritually and helped them to some extent materially too! He was *Brahma Jnani* — a *Jeevan Mukta,* a perfectly realised soul in the true sense of the term. His very *darshan,* nay, even sheer thought of him, would enlighten people and ensure their ultimate deliverance.

* * *

Having heard that Seshadri Swami used to frequent the Sadhu Matam (choultry for sadhus) in Thiruvannamalai, I went to see the place. It was empty but for three or four sadhus. They had also heard that the choultry had been one of the haunts of Seshadri Swami.

Next I visited the nearby Anna Chathiram, where food was served to all. A bank and a post office are housed there at present. When I peeped in curiously, an old man asked me, "Whom do you want to meet please?"

"Nobody in particular. I had heard that Seshadri Swami used to stay here once. I just wanted to see the holy place."

"No, that information is wrong. He never stayed in the choultry. He used to come and spend some time in the backyard. That's all."

"Have you seen him in person?"

"No, I don't belong to Thiruvannamalai. I have also only heard about him, just like you. He was a great soul. I was told that he was prone to gazing at the sun or the sky. One day, looking up at the sky, he is said to have shouted in joy, 'There goes Vitthoba, there he goes'. At that time, no one understood what he meant. Later it was discovered that Saint Vitthoba of Polur had passed away

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at exactly the same moment. There was nothing that was not known to Seshadri Swami."

From Anna Chathiram, I went to Chinna Gurukkal's (the junior temple priest) home, near the main *gopuram* of the temple. It was on the *pyal* of that house that Seshadri Swami had breathed his last. The *pyal* is no longer there; it was demolished when the house was partitioned.

I met the daughter-in-law of the junior priest, Parvathi Ammal. She was over sixty years old then. She clearly recollected what happened forty years ago, as if it had taken place but yesterday. Her description of the incidents was picturesque and vivid.

The Swami would walk into the house whenever he felt like it, stroll ino the kitchen, and finish off any eatables kept there. One evening, he walked into the kitchen, drank the coffee kept for the priest and went away saying, like a child, "If he comes, tell him I drank his coffee".

During his last days, the Swami suffered from cold and fever. In a way, his devotees were to blame. They had wished to give him a clean shave, a bath and bedeck him in floral garlands. They caught hold of him while he was wandering around and gave him a clean shave. But when they wanted to bathe him, he protested stoutly saying that he would catch cold if they did so. In their enthusiasm, they dragged him to the well opposite the priest's house and bathed him in cold water. Pots and pots of water were poured over his head by his many devotees. Water was brought from the temple tank too. It was a great feat for his admirers because they had performed *abhishekam* for him to their heart's content.

But, alas! the very next day the Swami caught cold and immediately started running temperature. But he did

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not seem to take notice of it. He roamed about as usual. But now he was thinning day by day. Even walking became a strenuous effort for him. Physically incapacitated, he finally settled himself on the *pyal* of the junior priest's house and lay still, as if in deep meditation.

Parvathi Ammal recollected the last days of the Swami with tears in her eyes. He refused to take food or medicine and lay unstirring. He did not look like a person suffering from any ailment.

When he passed away, hundreds of mourning admirers and followers gathered in Thiruvannamalai. His body was taken in a grand procession by his devotees and given a royal burial, to the east of the Ramanashramam.

Ramaswami Pillai, an inmate of Ramanashramam, who had seen both Ramana Maharishi and Seshadri Swami, told me that he was convinced that both were equally great Masters in their own way. They were referred to by their devotees as 'Seshadri the Senior' and 'Seshadri the Junior'.

Seshadri Swami, the senior, came to Thiruvannamalai in 1889 in his 19th year, seven years before the advent of Ramana Maharishi. In that sense, Seshadri was the precursor and predecessor of Ramana Maharishi, that master of silence, who personified the Light of Wisdom, which the holy hill of Arunachala is.

Saints and sages like Seshadri and Ramana are the human manifestations of this beacon of knowledge which is the eternal glory and everlasting symbol of India's spiritual munificence to mankind.

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Mummidivaram Yogi

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Mummidivaram Yogi

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My friend Mahadevan was responsible for my first trip to Mummidivaram. He kindled my dormant desire to have *darshan* of Bala Yogi. Having been there for Sivarathri *darshan*, he described his experience with great enthusiasm. "I'd like to go there for the next Sivarathri. Would you come with me?" I asked him.

"If you want, we can have his *darshan* even earlier," replied my friend.

I was surprised.

"What do you mean? I thought Bala Yogi gave *darshan* only once a year, on the day following Sivarathri. How can we see him before that?" I asked.

"You are right. The public *darshan* is only once a year. But the members of the committee in charge of the arrangements meet the Yogi two months before Sivarathri and report to him the arrangements planned. At that meeting, Bala Yogi gives his own suggestions as well."

I was intrigued.

"Don't tell me Bala Yogi speaks. I was given to understand that he seldom opens his mouth, or even his eyes, while giving *darshan*. What you say is news to me."

Mahadevan smiled. "He does not speak as we do. He speaks by signs and gestures. He opens his eyes only to look at the committee members. After his meeting with

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them, he grants *darshan* to those who have assembled outside the building. This *darshan* is not much publicised. If you can spare the time in December, we can go. On that day, the crowd will be in hundreds, not in lakhs, hence, we will be able to have a comfortable *darshan*."

"When should we start?" I asked.

"The committee *darshan* is on December 20th (1971). We will have to be at Mummidivaram by the 19th evening."

So the trip was fixed. Mahadevan would leave well in advance with his friends and be at Mummidivaram to receive us on the 19th.

* * *

Our car was speeding on the Madras-Calcutta trunk road. We had passed through Vijayawada, then Eluru, Tadepalligudem and Siddhantam, all in Andhra Pradesh. The road map indicated that we should take a turn to the right somewhere near Siddhantam to reach Amalapuram, a small town in East Godavari District. From there Mummidivaram village is but eight miles. We stopped and made enquiries. We were asked to proceed a little further and, on reaching Ravulapalem, take a turn to the right for Amalapuram. Those who travel by train must alight at Rajahmundry, and take a bus or taxi to Mummidivaram.

It was nearly 8 p.m. when we reached Mummidivaram.

"That must be Bala Yogi's ashram. See the festoons of coloured bulbs on the building," I pointed out.

Driver Palani headed for the lights. We passed by green fields and coconut groves before we came to the white building. Mahadevan greeted us with a broad smile.

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About a hundred persons had gathered there. They had obviously come for the next day's *darshan*. Their dinner over, they went in search of some shelter for their night's rest.

My friend Bobji, who had wandered around while we chatted, came back to report that we had better return to Amalapuram for the night, as there was no proper accommodation in Mummidivaram.

I went up to greet the President of the Committee, Mr. Balasundaram I.A.S. (who has since died), and the committee members with him. "Sir, we intend staying at Amalapuram for the night. When should we come back for the Yogi's *darshan*?" I asked.

"We can't give a definite answer now. The committee meets tomorrow morning to decide the exact time of *darshan*," Mr. Balasundaram told us.

"Well, could we see the places connected with the Yogi's life while waiting?"

"There won't be any difficulty about that. Mr. Narayanamurthi will be pleased to accompany you. He has been acquainted with this place from the days when Bala Yogi sat in deep meditation," said the President.

* * *

It was nearly nine when we reached Mummidivaram the next morning. In bright daylight, the rich greenness and natural beauty of the surroundings pleased the eye. The thick, cool coconut groves the River Godavari had helped raise provided ideal havens of peace and solitude for spiritual practices.

I found that the crowd around the main building in which the Yogi sat in meditation had swelled. Sweetmeat

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and tea stalls had sprung up in anticipation of a big crowd.

I had been under the impression that the day's *darshan* was a secret, but on reaching Mummidivaram I realised that it was a secret known to all!

We went round the main building, consisting of two separate blocks. We were told that the Bala Yogi sat in a closed hall in the front block, while his younger step-brother sat in the adjacent block. The Bala Yogi has been sitting in the same place and posture with his eyes closed, in deep meditation, for the past 25 years and more. The younger Yogi had attained the state of stillness of mind and body about 22 years ago. Both of them have had neither food nor sleep since they first sat in that state. It is a yogic feat which eludes all rational analysis.

A high compound wall encircled the two blocks. We entered through its northern gate. There we found a statue of the Bala Yogi. Photographs of the saint, taken every Sivarathri, hung on the wall with the years marked on them. The divine bull Nandi sat looking eastwards. Everyone approached the statue of the Yogi and paid their homage to him. Some broke coconuts, lit camphor, and offered worship. It is from the balcony above that the Bala Yogi gives his Sivarathri *darshan.*

I saw huge rose bushes with hundreds of blossoms on them. No one plucked a flower from them. A stranger spoke in awe of the luxuriant growth of various flower beds around the building known as Yoga Nilayam.

Narayanamurthi joined us here. "We go first to the coconut grove where Bala Yogi one fine morning sat in silence and attained spiritual eminence," he said leading the way.

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Gadigathala Gangayya was born in Mummidivaram to poor parents, who belonged to the lowest rungs in society. To him and his wife Ramamma was born a third son, Subba Rao, in October 1930. He was a mild and quiet boy who helped his father to look after their cattle. In his 16th year, a remarkable spiritual transformation overtook him. Leaving his home, he went to a coconut grove and sat in meditation. He has been in that state ever since.

The coconut grove, where the metamorphosis took place, is about 600 metres south of the main building. In the middle of the grove there is a tree whose coconuts are red in colour; those of the other trees are greenish. This tree is also the tallest. It was under this tree that Bala Yogi commenced his penance. A small room has been built on the spot in commemoration.

"I have heard that Swamiji's life was transformed by his seeing the Telugu movie *Bhaktha Potana*. Do you attach any credence to the story?" I asked Narayanamurthi.

"No, it is not a fact. Bala Yogi himself has refuted that version. At the time, a movie named *Nara Narayana* was being screened in a nearby theatre. The publicity hand-out carried a picture of Narada in it. Subba Rao was attracted by the picture and had cut it out and pasted it on a sheet of paper. This is the popular legend I have heard. On a particular day, he left his house at three in the morning, ran to this grove and sat under this coconut tree."

"What happened thereafter?"

"Greatly agitated, his parents and relatives searched for the boy all over the place. When they heard that he was in this grove, they rushed here and entreated him to return. But he sat motionless, like a log of wood, despite

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scores of big, black ants crawling all over his body. Even when he was lifted and placed on the *pyal* outside his house, his posture remained the same, unresponsive to the curious crowd that had gathered. Later, a thatched hut was put up on the site where you find the main building now. He has been sitting on that spot for more than 25 years now."

We talked as we walked towards the *cheri* where the Yogi was born and brought up. It is situated to the south of Yoga Nilayam. The place has undergone radical changes now. The hut in which he was born is no more there. Narayanamurthi pointed out a huge haystack and said that the hut had existed there. I was told a suitable edifice was being planned to mark the site.

A few years after his birth, Subba Rao lost his mother. Gangayya remarried and his second wife mothered five boys and a girl. The eldest among them, Nagabhushanam, is hailed as the junior Bala Yogi.

I met the elder brothers of Bala Yogi and his step-brothers and step-sister. They are all looked after by the committee, which has provided them with houses. The entire family were attired in new clothes on the day I met them. I was informed it was the death anniversary of Bala Yogi's father and that they were preparing to go to the cemetery to pay their homage.

* * *

Those who had gathered near the main building were getting restless. The committee had still not decided when the door should be opened for *darshan*.

The main building has six rooms, three in the rear and three in front. The Bala Yogi is seated on a raised platform,

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in the middle room of the rear portion. The two rooms on either side are locked. The committee sits in the first room in the front. Its west doorway is locked. They open the lock first, enter, and then throw open the doors of the room where Bala Yogi sits. After the committee members finish their meeting with the Swamiji, they withdraw, and then the waiting public are allowed to have *darshan.*

There is a room above the one occupied by the Bala Yogi. The rest of the space upstairs is a big hall.

Early that morning, the President had explained to me that only the previous year (1970) the old building had been brought down. The present building was constructed according to a design suggested by the Swamiji.

"Was the Swamiji sitting in the same place during the construction?" I asked.

"No, for a couple of weeks he occupied the balcony upstairs," answered the President.

"Do you mean to say you had finished the entire construction in two weeks?" I asked in surprise.

Subramaniam, one of the committee members present, and an engineer, answered my query. "It is really unbelievable. I said we would require at least three months to finish the construction. Swamiji insisted that the building should be completed in fifteen days. I argued that we might have to take more days for centering and concreting. The Swamiji suggested a novel method of construction that did away with centering. To my knowledge, no one had attempted this method, but how could I go against his command? I carried out his orders. The work was over in fifteen days. Many engineers were stunned by the achievement."

Swamiji had apparently also suggested the type of tim-

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ber that should be used, and the method of fixing the wooden planks.

* * *

The members of the committee came out after their deliberations and it was stated that the doors would open at 9.30 p.m. for the *darshan*.

The crowd swelled by the hour. "This is quite unusual this year. Normally we don't have such a huge gathering for the *darshan* prior to Sivarathri," commented a committee member.

A band was beating drums and clashing cymbals as it led a procession being taken out in connection with the death anniversary ceremonies of Swamiji's father. Gangayya's portrait was ensconced midst floral decorations in a cycle rickshaw. When the procession started, some of the committee members joined it.

There is a small building to the east of the main *mantapam* called Dhyana Mandir (the hall for meditation). In the central room, there was a platform with a serpent pedestal on it. It was originally intended for the Swamiji, who was expected to give *darshan* from there. But it did not work out that way. Now, the building is used by visitors as a dining-cum-rest hall.

We left to have a look around the village. It had grown into a miniature township.

Lankamma is the village goddess. Her annual festival is celebrated with great pomp and enthusiasm by the villagers. Contractual servants change their masters during the festival. The shrine is not very impressive; the deity is imposing but benign.

Over the entrance of the Kesava Perumal temple, there

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is a model of the scene of Lord Narayana granting *darshan* to young Dhruva. It symbolises the '*tapas*vic' state of the Bala Yogi. There is a small shrine for Siva to the south of the market. Lord Maheshwara and his consort Umadevi are the main deities there. Idols of Kaala Bhairava, Vinayaka, Durga, Gayathri and Sri Adi Sankaracharya find a place in the outer enclosure.

When I returned to the main building after my tour, I saw the gathering still waiting, passing the time discussing something or the other. Petty shops had sprung up suddenly, with books on Swamiji and pictures of him on sale. The whole place was a tower of babel, but it was clear that all eagerly awaited the *darshan*.

I was introduced to a Bulusu Buchi Raju, a local resident, who had done elaborate research into the yogic achievements of the Swamiji. He had, in the beginning, entertained doubts about the bona fides of the Swamiji; he was averse to accepting the idea that the Swami really lived without food or water. Suspecting a hoax, he kept a close vigil throughout the day. After six months of careful watch, he was convinced that nobody gave food or water stealthily to the young yogi. He also had no doubt whatsoever that the young Swami had conquered hunger, thirst and sleep and become completely immersed in his inner self. Since then, nothing had happened there for him to change his opinion about the genuineness of the Swamiji's unique mystic powers.

"In the early days, did you observe any miracles here?" I asked.

"Oh yes. I have heard locked doors rattle and seen them going up and down. Some days, milk, honey and turmeric water flowed from the room through a small

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hole. At other times, perfumed smoke would also emanate from there."

Later, I met the Swamiji's elder brother, Venkanna. He stressed that before his brother attained the super state, he looked and behaved like any other boy of his age.

"Your brother slaved for some wealthy persons in the village. Is there any former employer of his still alive?" I enquired. "Yes, his last employer lives but 400 metres from this place. If you wish, I will take you there," offered Venkanna.

Both of us went to meet Mattaparthy Venkanna Garu, Swamiji's last employer. He was an old man of ninety. It was in 1946, while working for him, that Subba Rao had left his home suddenly and gone to sit under the coconut tree.

"He was very unassuming and obedient. I fed him twice daily. He did not eat much. He was fair and very charming. Hence we called him 'Pandu' (*pandu* means 'fruit' in Telugu).

"How much did you pay him?" I asked.

"I never paid him anything in cash," the old man said.

Swamiji's brother intervened at this point. "My brother was sent to work for him so that the family debt might be discharged in due course. But when my brother abruptly left his service, I had to toil for the old man and discharge the entire debt."

"When you heard that the boy had left home for good and sought solitude and silence in the coconut grove, did you go to see him?" I asked Venkanna Garu.

"No, we were upset that the boy had turned abnormal while working for us. We were also afraid of scandal in the village, accusing us of being responsible for his mental

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transformation. So we avoided going to the grove."

"Am I to understand that you never saw him after he left your service?"

"Oh no, I went several times to see him. But he would not see me. He seldom opens his eyes."

"What do you think of him now?"

"I am grateful to the Almighty that I have had the good fortune to feed such a holy personage with my own hands."

By the time I bade the old man goodbye the crowd at the main building was well over a thousand.

The President crossed my path with a key in his hand.

"I hope you plan to open the doors at nine-thirty as scheduled," I enquired.

"I am sorry. There is a slight change in the programme. The committee proposes to meet again at 10 p.m. We intend unlocking the doors at eleven, but the will of the Swamiji is needed for the doors to fully open," said the President gravely.

* * *

Outside the Dhyana Mandir, music concerts and religious discourses were going on side by side. Those who had brought their dinner with them, shared the food, sitting in small family groups. Many covered themselves with woollen blankets to protect themselves against the biting cold. Those who knew they could not have *darshan* before midnight huddled in the available shelters. The committee members were in great demand, for through their good offices their friends were assured of a convenient *darshan*.

The time was eight-thirty. My friends and I sat in a corner enjoying the melodious *nadaswaram* music.

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Mahadevan informed us that the committee members had gone in and that we must now occupy vantage positions very near the room so that we could gain entrance without difficulty as soon as the doors were opened. "As soon as the members finish their meeting with the Swamiji they will come out and, immediately afterwards, those who are inside the main enclosure will be allowed to go in for *darshan*. The rest will be permitted to enter only thereafter. If we get inside the enclosure and wait near the room where the committee meeting is being held, we will be the first to enter — you may even be allowed to take photographs," Mahadevan explained.

We got up immediately and followed Mahadevan. The policemen on duty let us in after a question or two. A while later, the committee members disappeared into the room, one by one, and the doors closed behind them. A couple of police constables stood guard.

Our enclosure filled up quickly and was soon overflowing. Each one had used the name of a committee member to get in!

We were hardly twenty at first, soon we were a hundred, and more were pushing their way in.

It was ten. A member who had arrived late for the meeting knocked at the door. Sundaresan, our photographer, ran up to him and pleaded, "Will you please let me know when the President unlocks the Swamiji's room? I want to photograph the event." The member nodded encouragingly and went in. He was not to be seen at all for the rest of the night!

The doors opened again. Another committee member came out. Sundaresan, who was confident that he had come to take him in, rushed forward and asked him some-

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thing. The member ignored him completely, walked up to the constable at the gate, used his influence to let inside the enclosure his friends anxiously waiting outside, and disappeared once again into the room!

The crowd in the enclosure had swelled to two hundred and we were all crushed together.

Bobji started muttering impatiently, "What are they doing inside? It is nearing eleven now."

"Once the members get in they forget the world. Probably they have already opened the lock and may be waiting for the doors to relent. If the Swamiji does not will it, they cannot open the doors, however much they might try. It may take two or even four hours. Sometimes one may have to wait even for two days," said Natarajan, a retired I.A.S. officer from Madras. He had been an annual visitor to Mummidivaram for many years now.

The clock struck twelve. The waiting public grew more and more restive.

Just then a sickly person, with unsteady steps, was led in by a couple of assistants. We were told that he was one of the committee members and that he had come from his sickbed, to have *darshan* of the Swamiji. Subbaraju, brother of the junior Bala Yogi, accompanied this member to ensure his entry into the committee room. Subbaraju conducted him into the room, and came out after five minutes.

Natarajan signalled Subbaraju to come closer and enquired, "Is the meeting still going on? Have they unlocked the room or not?"

Subbaraju smiled derisively. "It is two hours since the members went into the Swamiji's chamber. Today the door gave way as soon as it was unlocked. They are

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engaged in conversation with Swamiji." All of us cut a very sorry figure. Poor Sundaresan. He had been hoping to get a scoop by photographing the unlocking ceremony!

The news that the committee members were with the Swamiji spread among the crowd like wild fire. A new confidence overtook them; everyone stirred to life.

"How long do the committee members usually remain with the Swamiji?" I asked Natarajan.

"If a big crowd waits outside, Swamiji prefers to have the *darshan* first and then the meeting. If, however, he decides to give priority to the meeting, it might extend up to four or five in the morning," answered Natarajan.

Suddenly there was brisk movement among the police officers. It was the unmistakable sign of some V.I.P.'s arrival. The next moment, a State Minister appeared on the scene. The usual entourage followed him.

"Are these high-ups also expected to wait outside and bide their time?" I enquired.

"Of course. Many V.I.Ps. long to see the Swamiji when he opens his eyes. But they return disappointed. Swamiji opens his eyes only when he meets the committee members and converses with them by signs and gestures," explained Natarajan.

Committee members kept darting in and out of the room. Whenever they were sighted, people would rush to them and say something. All I could think of was the scene of feverish activity in front of any building where votes are being counted after an election, where every time a person emerges out of the building someone from the waiting public would run up to him to know the latest position of his favourite candidate!

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'The clock struck one. We heard a thunderous noise from the crowd beyond the compound wall. The police on duty shouted at the crowd. The general pandemonium spread to our enclosure too and there was much irksome jostling. Everyone edged his way into the committee room through the half-opened doorway and soon it was packed to capacity. It was like Vaikuntha Ekadasi day in a Vishnu temple where devotional fervour is worked up to a feverish pitch, and the craze to have the first *darshan* ends in utter chaos.

Exactly at one-thirty the doors of the Swamiji's chamber were thrown open to the public. The impatient crowd surged in. Young and old, rich and poor, male and female, minister and officer, master and servant, all were trapped in the bottleneck. My friends and I were crushed, unable to move backward or forward. Poor Sundaresan held his costly camera over his head and struggled desperately to save it. We heard among the myriad voices the words '*randi*', '*vanga*', 'come in' distinctly, as people pulled one another inside. Somebody pulled our hands too! Pandemonium prevailed. The shouting was maniacal; the atmosphere riotous.

* * *

When, after these nightmarish experiences, I entered the chamber I found myself face to face with the embodiment of abiding peace and tranquillity. The Yogi was seated motionless, like a statue 'far from the madding crowd'. He looked like one whose mind was firmly fixed in transcendental meditation. He appeared to have chosen the metaphysical world for his permanent abode. All my thoughts vanished like dew before the rising sun the

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moment I saw the statue-like Swamiji. I felt as if I was confronting my own soul-force that had assumed human form.

Because of my familiarity with photographs of Swamiji in that posture, I was not taken aback initially. But when the thought that he had been sitting there for over 25 years without food or water, light or ventilation, crossed my mind, I was overawed. 'How can he exist like this?' was the question uppermost in my mind. There were no answers. Instead, I stood helplessly before the riddle of all riddles.

Though the Bala Yogi sits in yogic silence, his surroundings present a modern look. The walls close to the platform on which he sits, the steps leading to it, and the floor are of shiny milk-white slabs, because of which the entire electrically-lit chamber is aglow. Against the magnificent white backdrop, his presence resembles a blooming red lotus in the centre of a milky ocean.

His incredibly long hair is one foot thick and flows from his head some six or seven feet like a dark python. It is neither unruly nor matted, but seems to have been plaited patiently by someone.

The Bala Yogi sits on an impressive tiger skin spread on the platform. The tiger's head is big and awe-inspiring.

At the eastern end of the platform is a small image of Lord Krishna. I close my eyes for a split second. Lord Narayana stands in his majestic cosmic form in the place of Krishna's image.

I open my eyes, and drink deep of the peace writ large on Bala Yogi's face.

Has he been sitting here for the past 25 years without hunger, without thirst? What an extraordinary miracle in

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this scientific age! Can a human being exist like this? We refer to a man setting foot on the moon as a rare feat. What has the rationalistic world to say about this remarkable achievement of the human spirit?

My thoughts relentlessly pursue these questions; but the mystery will not resolve itself. I find myself in a maze and the way out only grows more and more elusive.

I glance around the room. There are no large windows. In the wall at the back there are two small ventilators, closed and hooked. The doors of the rooms on either side are also bolted securely.

I had been told that old books and clothes presented to Swamiji by his devotees had been dumped in one of the rooms.

I looked at Swamiji's body closely. He hadn't taken a bath for 25 years! But he appeared fresh and bright, as if he had just then had his bath and had dressed in clean clothes. During the first month of his transformation, he had bathed daily in the Godavari Canal which runs in front of the ashram. Later, he gave up the habit. During those initial days, his father placed a cup of milk on the window sill from outside. On some days, the cup would be found empty; on other days, the milk would still be there. In course of time, that practice too stopped.

In the beginning, the room was not locked from outside. The Yogi remained in an ecstatic trance for 32 months at a stretch. When he opened his eyes, he told the first man whom he saw to lock the room from outside, as he disliked persons touching and disturbing him. But he agreed to grant *darshan* between four and six every morning. As the curious visitors were not orderly, he put an end to that practice too.

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There developed a serious difference of opinion between the local residents and Swamiji's relatives about keeping the room locked. One day, when it led to a clash, the police had to intervene.

That brought the then Collector of East Godavari District, the late Mr.D.Balasundaram, I.A.S. (not to be confused with the person of the same name who was the president of the committee during this visit of mine to Mummidivaram), to the village for the first time. He suggested setting up the committee. The Bala Yogi then agreed to grant *darshan* to the public the day after Sivarathri, from four in the morning up to midnight. It was in this connection that the practice of the committee meeting him to make the necessary arrangements began. And he then agreed to give a *darshan* on this occasion too. It was accordingly named the '*darshan* prior to Sivarathri'.

It was this *darshan* I was enjoying now. I saw his lips part a little. There was a minute movement in his throat, as if he was swallowing saliva. His hands were interlocked tightly. But I saw the left thumb shake. When even these insignificant movements of his limbs thrilled us, how joyous we would feel if we could see him open his eyes and speak with gestures! "How lucky the committee members are!," I mused.

I was standing very close to the platform on which he was sitting. I wanted to go nearer and observe him at close quarters, but his halo of austerity held me back. But not the crowd in the front room. They were shouting and pushing to get in. In their enthusiasm, they seemed to have forgotten their proximity to a rare yogi and behaved like irresponsible urchins. Some even threw small coins

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on Swamiji's person. Many who fell flat on the ground in obeisance, would not move out of the way. The new entrants chased away those who had already had *darshan*. But how could they get out? A big crowd stood there blocking the entrance. It was a traffic jam. Commotion prevailed.

But like a sturdy and immovable lighthouse that dares the onslaught of the roaring waves, the Swamiji sat in perfect peace amidst the din and noise, emitting a spiritual light all around.

* * *

The three of us somehow managed to get out of the room and hastened to have *darshan* of the junior Yogi. The moment the senior Swamiji's *darshan* started, the junior Yogi's room was also thrown open. The committee had constructed a separate balcony for him to occupy on the day after Sivarathri for the people to have his *darshan* also, but he would not oblige. He had made it very clear that anybody who was so interested should come to his room for *darshan*.

On that day, there was overcrowding and order could not be restored in the chaotic queue. The endless shouting exasperated the policemen on duty. They left their posts temporarily in sheer disgust and exhaustion. Hence, for some time, only the strong and the valiant could gain entry into the junior Yogi's room. Later, partial order was restored and, after some pushing and shoving, we too managed to get in and have his *darshan*!

In 1950, during the Sivarathri *darshan* of the senior Swamiji, his step-brother Nagabhushanam sat in front of him, in the same posture, in deep meditation with his eyes

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closed. At that moment, he had also entered into a yogic trance, in which he has sat ever since, motionless, without food or water. Two brothers, one after the other, had attained spiritual eminence. Their father, Gadigathala Gangayya, must indeed have done many a good deed in his previous birth.

The junior Yogi sits erect as though made of granite. Only if you have an eye for it can you see him breathe very softly. He does not open his eyes at all. Nor does he make any gestures with his hands.

In his presence, too, a thousand thoughts crossed my mind. Again an unsolvable riddle confronted me. Wondering about this mystery, fearing the unknown powers of the mystic and the occult, I came out humbled by the unseen forces that shape our destiny.

It was three in the morning when we left for Madras. The only thought uppermost in our minds was that we should come back to Mummidivaram for Sivarathri *darshan*.

* * *

On Sivarathri day (February 1972) we were again at Mummidivaram. As we approached the village, we saw a huge crowd of people proceeding towards Bala Yogi's ashram. Posses of policemen posted for *bandobust* duty were busy trying to regulate the unmanageable crowd. Already, hundreds of persons were sitting in a queue inside the enclosures opposite the main building.

"The *darshan* is to take place only at four tomorrow morning. See how people have taken vantage positions already," I wondered aloud.

A local person near me responded, "You are mistaken, Sir; these persons have been here since 11 a.m. They

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have occupied the front positions, braving the weather, in order to have the first *darshan* of the Swamiji."

The sitting queue was lengthening each minute. It meandered its way to an open ground which was already overflowing with devotees.

Many persons stood in groups, eagerly waiting to catch the eyes of a committee member. A person needs the favour of a committee member to enter the compound of the main building. Once you are inside, you are sure of a 'room *darshan*'. The committee members were seen sending secret information to friends and relatives as to where and when they had to be present to enter the compound without much difficulty.

Suddenly a fleet of cars and jeeps screeched to a stop. Police officials stood at attention and saluted. High-ranking government and police officers got down from the cars accompanied by their families. A separate busload of chairs and sofas arrived almost immediately afterwards. The attendants arranged them in the tents already pitched inside the compound. Why should anyone suffer in the cold when he wields power and influence?

I met the President and asked him when the door would be opened that night.

"We intend opening exactly at three in the morning. We hope the *darshan* will start almost immediately," he told me.

"You may unlock at three. Suppose it takes time for the doors to open, you will have to wait, won't you?"

"No, today the doors will open at once. During the December meeting, the Swamiji had instructed us to unlock the door exactly at three for Sivarathri *darshan*. Hence

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we hope we will not have to wait," he said confidently and went to meet some others wanting to see him.

We waited and listened to the *bhajans* being sung inside. Some distance away, a man was delivering a religious discourse. But what caught our attention and that of most others was a musical drama enacted by one Satyanarayana. It was akin to the rural street drama of Tamil Nadu known as *therukoothu*. But this was mono-acting; one character spoke, sang and acted the story of the Lord of the Seven Hills. The way he sang, his delivery of the dialogue and his graceful gestures held our attention. Though he spoke in an alien tongue, we were enchanted.

* * *

We were conducted into the compound as early as 11 p.m. I saw some prominent Tamil faces in the gathering. I was happy to meet O.V.Alagesan, a former Central Minister, and N.Mahalingam, the well-known industrialist.

"After reading of your experiences at Mummidivaram, I was tempted to come," said the former Minister.

"I have heard a lot about Bala Yogi. But after going through your articles I was impressed by his glorious achievements. So here I am for Sivarathri *darshan*," explained the industrialist.

My journalist friend Bhagirathan, who had accompanied the two VIPs, said, "Generally I agree with what you write. But in an article you have mentioned, as something of a wonder, Bala Yogi's advice to lay concrete without the aid of centering. This is not an original idea or anything extraordinary. Even in our village the custom of constructing the roof using the support of wooden planks

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is in vogue. In Bangalore, too, they lay concrete without centering."

"Maybe. But doesn't it surprise you that an illiterate cowherd boy who has not moved out of his village and who locked himself up in a room 25 years ago, a man who has been completely unexposed to the outside world, had suggested this novel construction technique?" I asked, but he responded only with a smile.

"It is a wonder of wonders that a human being could sit like this for 25 years without food and water. I haven't heard of such a phenomenon before. Do you know anybody else who has such an achievement to his credit?" Alagesan enquired.

"No, not that I know of. His present spiritual attainment is most unbelievable."

"There cannot be a second opinion about that," I said.

"Sir, is it a fact that he never eats anything, or...?" Bhagirathan's voice trailed off.

"Be bold about what you want to ask. When confronted with such an inexplicable phenomenon, those who depend on the intellect alone for guidance are likely to be sceptical about things which elude rational analysis. Only when we spiritualise our way of thinking, might the truth be revealed to us," I said in reply.

I saw that such doubts lurked in the minds of many. A discussion ensued among some of them as to how the Swamiji came to the balcony from his room. Each had his own version. Some even felt that the Swamiji was physically lifted from his chamber and placed in the balcony!

There is a spiral staircase below the balcony. Once a year this staircase is used by those who dust and clean the balcony. Nobody has seen the Swamiji use the steps. It is

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still a mystery as to how he comes and occupies his seat on the balcony.

At 2.45 a.m, the President and other members went into the committee room. Exactly at three, after a member broke a coconut as a good augury, the President unlocked the door and gently pushed it. It opened instantaneously.

After a while, those waiting outside were allowed to go in. The crowd was thicker than it was during the December *darshan*. There was greater confusion, worse regulation, and a deafening noise. This time I could see the Swamiji only from a distance. He was sitting as I saw him last. Only his body seemed to have shrunk a little.

When our *darshan* of both the senior and the junior Swamijis was over it was four o'clock. The several lakhs of people who had gathered outside stood in anxious expectation, gazing at the balcony. The bamboo screens put up on the sides of the balcony were removed and the collapsible gates opened. Some committee members were seen dusting the place with their upper cloths. Bala Yogi was expected there any moment.

The wooden shutters would be removed as soon as the Swamiji came to the balcony. Some prominent persons were peeping through small holes to find out if he had already arrived there.

It was four-thirty. The impatient crowd became restive and their excitement worked them up to a crazy pitch.

It was five. Still the Swamiji had not arrived. Nobody could guess the reason for the delay. "Normally he is here by four. Perhaps he is engaged with the committee members." There were many surmises, many opinions, many doubts.

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Suddenly the loudspeakers blared. "The Swamiji will give *darshan* in half an hour's time."

The activity on the balcony subsided. A comparative quiet descended on the waiting crowd. After half an hour the shutters were removed. And there sat the Bala Yogi in a throne shaped like the Naga *asana* — the serpent pose — radiant like the rising sun.

The lakhs of admirers who had kept awake throughout the night were in ecstasy. It was as if they were blessed with the *darshan* of Siva himself on Sivarathri day.

The serpentine queue started moving. Each one climbed the steps, had a very close soul-filling view of the Swamiji, descended on the other side, went to the adjacent building and, after *darshan* of the junior Swamiji, went home immensely satisfied with the visit.

Later, I had occasion to exchange a few words with one of the committee members from Tamil Nadu. I asked him out of curiosity, "You were inside all the time. Did you notice how the Swamiji came to the balcony?"

"No, sir, it is impossible to know. After meeting the Swamiji, we came out and locked the door from outside. We couldn't see how he went up. I sat very near him in the balcony and observed his feet minutely. There was not a single particle of dust on them. If he had walked through the room and up the staircase which had been closed for a year, however carefully we might have cleaned it, how do you account for the absence of even a small particle of dust? I don't believe he walked up to the balcony," he said earnestly.

And, so, the mystique remains unresolved!

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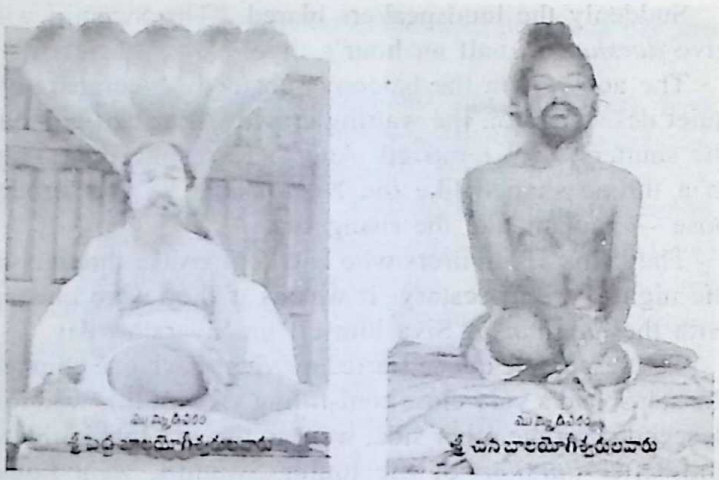

The senior and junior Bala Yogis

Amma of Jillellamudi

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Amma of Jillellamudi

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Amma of Jillellamudi

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While returning from Mummidivaram, after having the *darshan* of Bala Yogi on Sivarathri day, I stopped at Tenali in Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh, to meet my collegemate Nagarajan. As we were meeting after some years, we had much to talk about. As was his wont, he raised unnecessary heat while discussing contemporary politics, but then his wife tactfully announced that lunch was ready.

Lunch over, I was returning after washing my hands when a colourful calendar with a picture of an attractive middle-aged woman arrested my attention. I stood for a moment lost in the heavenly beauty of her sublime face, which reflected the cool radiance of the moon. Her eyes were full of the nectar of compassion and looked at us with a motherly love.

"Have you ever heard about this lady?" my friend asked casually.

"No, who is she?" I asked.

"Everyone calls her 'Amma' (Mother). She resides at Jillellamudi, eight miles from Bapatla. Hundreds of persons gather there daily to have her *darshan*. I am told that if you sit at her feet for some time, you are sure to be blessed with mental peace." Nagarajan's introduction was brief and to the point.

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"Let's go there," I said and my friend, though taken completely by surprise, agreed to join me.

From Tenali, we went to Bapatla and from there we followed the bus route to Peddanandipadu. At the seventh mile, a narrow pathway branched off from the main road. We stopped to make enquiries.

A passerby said, "Going to see Amma, eh? She lives in that white building. Go this way, it is only a mile-and-a-half from here."

It was a two-storeyed building. It looked like a big hostel at first sight. I asked the first person we met there, "Can we have the *darshan* of Amma just now?"

"Go upstairs, Amma is giving audience in her room. You have come at the right time."

On the verandah upstairs, a blind person was reciting some hymns. His fervour and devotion touched my heart. Amma was in the opposite room.

A woman sat by the doorway, gazing devoutly at someone in the room. We stood by her in the doorway and looked in reverentially. Amma, who was seated on a cot, glanced our way. At that moment it seemed as if showers of love had drenched us.

The woman by the doorway stood up abruptly and, almost inaudibly, said, "Go in". We stepped in, in hushed silence, one by one. "Please be seated," said a gentleman sitting near Amma and we sat down quietly.

It was a small room. Eight men and women were sitting erect in absolute silence. A foreigner with a goatee sat leaning against the wall with eyes closed, as if in deep meditation.

I looked at Amma's face. The large, round vermilion mark placed between her eyebrows attracted my attention

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first. Like the gold ornament that adorns a golden pot, the jewellery Amma wore added more beauty to her beauty. Her face glowed with wondrous lustre, as if the peace reigning in the entire universe had settled there. It was a repository of compassion, graciousness, love, beauty, happiness and peace. We suddenly felt like little children sitting face to face with our mother.

An irresistible longing to look into Amma's eyes overtook me and I looked at her face. Amma also looked at me. And a thousand moons seemed to bathe my body with cool nectar. Who else except a mother is capable of such overflowing love?

Mother is the universal force that binds together with equal love and affection the learned and the illiterate, the rich and the poor, the aged and the young, male and female, animals, birds, insects and worms. Goddess Sakthi, the universal Divine Mother, symbolises this fundamental and eternal truth.

"If you want to ask anything of Amma, you may do so," one of the devotees told me.

"I have not come to ask questions, but only to have Amma's *darshan,*" I said and again looked at her. Who can resist the temptation to have a bath in the waterfalls at Courtallam!

Amma kept looking at me and it was indeed a difficult task to meet her eyes. Yet I could not divert my attention from that merciful gaze.

Suddenly I had an urge to speak. Amma's lips parted a little, as if to utter something. But there was no articulation. Her eyes spoke instead. I could read from her facial expression that she wanted to convey that she knew everything.

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I fell at her feet.

After a while, Amma called us one by one and offered *prasad*. She gave each of us a fruit and a handful of tiny packets of vermilion. When we took our leave of her, she said almost in a whisper, "Take your meals before you leave". She spoke in Telugu.

It was not meal time for us. I thought she must have been under the impression that we had not had our lunch yet. So I said in all humility, "We have had our lunch, Amma".

Mother heard me and yet signalled us to have our food before we left the precincts.

The woman waiting outside led us to the dining hall. It is named Anna Poornalayam (the temple of food). Whoever comes to see Amma, whatever the number and whatever be the time of the day, is treated to a repast. From six in the morning up to midnight, and even after that, rice, *sambar* and other dishes are available in the kitchen.

All the women inmates are dedicated to a service of love to the Mother. Just like a housewife who attends with great enthusiasm to the needs and convenience of her relatives who come from her parents' home, the band of active workers there served us with spontaneous affection. It seemed as though Amma would be satisfied only if her 'children' who called on her were fed properly.

There I met Captain Dakshinamurthi, an army officer who belonged to Guntur District. He was stationed in Jalandhar in the Punjab and had come with his wife on ten days' leave to be with Amma.

The captain showed me round the *illam* (the house). No one referred to it as an ashram. It is called *Andarillam*

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in Telugu, meaning 'The house common to all'. Those who wish can stay there for two or three days or even a week.

The inmates get up very early in the morning and wake up Amma after reciting the morning invocation. In the evening, they assemble in a hall and recite hymns in praise of gods and goddesses. They call it Sandhya-vandanam — evening prayer. Those who wish may worship Amma by offering flowers at her feet.

When I was there (in February 1972), the inmates were running a Sanskrit school. They were also planning to start a *Veda patasala* and an Oriental college. Captain Dakshinamurthi was very hopeful that "liberal donations from Amma's children were sure to pour in. The day when Amma's dream comes true is not far off."

"How old is Amma?"

"This year, she completes her 49th year."

We came to an unimpressive hut.

"This was Amma's original residence," said the captain.

We went in. Inside was a figure of a girl made of cardboard. It was dressed in a costly silk saree and bedecked with ornaments. The face was a photograph, while the body was a drawing.

"Who is this?" I enquired.

"This is the figure of Amma's daughter, Hyma. She died four years ago, when she was 25. It was after this tragedy that Amma left this place and occupied the new building," the captain explained.

"Was she the only daughter of Amma?"

"Yes, but she has two sons. Hyma suddenly fell ill and her condition became very serious. Amma was insistent

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that her daughter should not be removed to hospital. But the inmates would not listen. They had her admitted in the Guntur hospital in a precarious condition. The doctors were helpless and could not save her."

"Was Amma very attached to her daughter?"

"As far as Amma is concerned, she has equal love and affection for all. She loved her daughter as she loved us. Hyma served her mother just as the other sisters here do."

"Did Amma ever say to anyone that her daughter would die young?" I asked.

The captain was engrossed in thought for a while, then said, "You are right in a way. It seems Amma used to tell her daughter quite often 'In your 25th year, there is going to be a remarkable transformation in your life'. The real import of that statement became clear only after her death."

There was a shrine next to the hut.

"This is Hymalayam, Hyma's shrine. You will find her *samadhi* here," explained the captain and led us in. A marble statue of Hyma was on her *samadhi*. There was a *Sivalinga* below the statue. Two women, who sat facing each other, were offering devout worship.

Another hall was being erected next to Hymalayam.

"Amma wanted this to be built and we are proceeding with the work. But only Amma knows the purpose of it," smiled the captain.

I asked the captain why and how he had been drawn close to Amma.

He narrated how his marriage took place most unexpectedly through Amma's blessings.

Four years ago, a friend had persuaded Dakshinamurthi to come to Jillellamudi to have the *darshan* of Amma. He sat in her presence for half an hour and left the room. He

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had not taken much notice of the other occupants of the room.

After he left, Amma asked Annapoorna, a young girl who was attending on her, if she had observed the young man who had just then gone out.

She blushed and said, "Yes, Amma, I saw him".

"That boy is your future husband. If you marry, you will only marry him. If not, you will remain a virgin for the rest of your life," Amma predicted.

Every unmarried girl dreams of the type of husband she would like to have. In the same way, every bachelor carves out in his mind the imaginary figure of his future wife. This is but natural.

Captain Dakshinamurthi was no exception to this. He had already made up his mind about the qualifications and qualities a soldier's wife should possess. He had observed the wives of his colleagues in the army. Hence, he wanted to marry a charming, sociable woman with a modern outlook. He was not at all prepared to surrender to his parents or relatives his right to choose his wife.

When close relatives revealed to Dakshinamurthi Jillellamudi Amma's prediction that Annapoorna would be his wife, he was disconcerted. From the description they gave of Annapoorna, he was convinced that she came nowhere near his dream girl, either in physical appearance or educational qualifications, ideas, social behaviour or accomplishments. Given to ultramodern ideas about marriage, he flatly refused to marry an old-fashioned, domesticated country girl, whom he had not seen or known.

After this, he kept away from Jillellamudi Amma. He avoided her lest she compel him to marry the girl she had chosen.

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Dakshinamurthi was stationed at the time at Ahmadnagar. One of his colleagues had married a ravishing beauty. The other officers were jealous of him. At parties and social gatherings, she was the centre of attraction. Everyone seemed to seek her company. Her husband, who had thought himself very lucky in the beginning, began to suffer mental torture and agony. The very wife whom he had thought would be a source of peace and happiness was now making his life miserable. Dakshinamurthi learned a valuable lesson from the unenviable condition of his friend.

Then, an English movie he happened to see changed his thinking completely. The hero of the story was an army officer. He married a very pretty and charming girl. Because of that he underwent untold sufferings. While watching the movie, Dakshinamurthi imagined himself for a while to be in the position of the hero. He felt all that the hero suffered was equally applicable to him also. He was altogether a new person when he came out of the show. The castles in the air he had built about the type of girl he should choose as his wife were razed to the ground before his very eyes. Far from resenting it, he was immensely pleased. He heaved a sigh of relief at having unloaded a heavy burden off his mind.

The captain surrendered to Jillellamudi Amma without any reservation whatsoever. He told his relatives that he had no objection to marrying the girl of Amma's choice. Everything happened quickly after that. In 1969, Captain Dakshinamurthi was married to Annapoorna at Jillellamudi, in Amma's presence and with her blessings.

Dakshinamurthi cited his metamorphosis and the influence under which he married Annapoorna as an example

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of Amma's divine qualities and spiritual calibre. He said that incident after incident may be related to vindicate the glory of Amma, but it was enough to say that all those who came under her influence considered her as the universal Mother, Bala Thirupurasundari and Rajarajeswari, because of their unique personal experiences.

"Does Amma offer daily prayers to any godhead?" I asked.

"As far as I know, she doesn't. Everyone worships her and performs pooja to her lotus feet. But Amma has never claimed to be a god or goddess. She seldom performs miracles to impress. She sits in all humility as the embodiment of divine love and universal motherhood. That is all. Nothing more, nothing less," said Dakshinamurthi and added, "I will reveal a secret to you. Amma, who feeds hundreds of persons every day to their hearts' content, takes only barley water and coffee. If any devotee offers her something, she will just taste it to please him or her and that, too, only occasionally."

* * *

The more I heard about Amma, the more I read about her, the more I was convinced she was an uncommon person. Her early life was extraordinary.

Seethapathy was a petty village officer in Mannava, a hamlet in Guntur District. His wife, Rangamma, gave birth to five children and lost them one by one. The sixth was a male child. They prayed to Chenna Kesava Perumal and Lakshmi Devi, the presiding deities of the local temple, that the child might be spared. And he was.

One day, Seethapathy was sitting under a tamarind tree deeply engrossed in thoughts about the fate that had

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overtaken his children. Just then, a girl of around five appeared before him. The next moment, she changed her form and presented herself as Chenna Kesava Perumal and Lakshmi Devi. In a split second, they vanished from his sight and, once again, the young girl stood before him.

On another occasion, Seethapathy had a dream. His house was vacant. In the inner courtyard sat a very beautiful middle-aged woman in a chair. A large round vermilion mark was prominent between her eyebrows.

"Who are you?" asked Seethapathy.

"I am Amma," she replied.

"Whose mother?" asked Seethapathy.

"I am mother to all," the woman replied succinctly.

Pundits who came to know of the vision Seethapathy had had under the tamarind tree and of his dream, predicted that the lucky parents were certain to be blessed with a child soon. As predicted, Rangamma became pregnant in a few months. During her pregnancy, she had many a dream of divine significance. She was always in raptures in a way she had not experienced before. She had the unique feeling of bearing the entire universe in her womb. Suddenly she would burst into laughter or shed tears of joy.

In 1923, on the 20th of March, the sacred Suddha Ekadasi day, just before dawn, when the temple bells and conches announced the inauguration of Chenna Kesava Perumal's annual festival, Rangamma gave birth to a female child. They named her Anasuya.

Anasuya grew up an unusually precocious child. In her second year, she sat under a pomegranate tree one day in the *Padmasana* posture, with her eyes half-closed, held her breath and went into a trance. Unable to compre-

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hend its deep significance and mistaking it for a health problem, the parents took her to a doctor for treatment. On another occasion, she was found unconscious. When she came to, she explained that she was in *Sambhavi Mudra*.

On another day, Anasuya, who was returning from Ponnur in a bullock cart accompanied by her mother, expressed her wish to get down at a particular spot. The cart was stopped, and the mother and child got down.

"Mother, this is a nice place, let us stay here," suggested Anasuya.

"There is no house near here. How can we stay?" asked her mother.

"It is not necessary. I shall stay here," the girl insisted.

"How can a child remain alone without its mother?" asked her mother.

"Why not? After you leave, I shall be Amma," the girl explained.

The shrine of Brahmarambika in the Sahasralingeswarar Temple near Ponnur later sprang up exactly on the spot where Anasuya had stopped on her way from Ponnur.

When she was three years old, Anasuya came down with a high fever and gave many anxious moments to her mother. An old neighbour, Maridamma, consoled Rangamma saying that the child would recover by the grace of the Rajalakshmi *yantra* in the Chenna Kesava Perumal Temple. At that point, Anasuya opened her eyes and snapped, "It is not the Rajalakshmi *yantra,* it is the Rajarajeswari *yantra*". When Amma was in Mannava village in later years, she showed that particular *yantra* to everyone.

* * *

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Rangamma died when her daughter was four years old. Her husband was inconsolable. The young Anasuya soothed her father by wiping the tears rolling down his cheeks with her tiny fingers.

The father, who wanted his daughter to understand the import and magnitude of the tragedy, said repeatedly, "Your mother has gone for ever. She will not come back, my child."

"Where has Mother gone?" asked Anasuya innocently.

"Yes, yes. Where has she gone...?" the father asked himself repeatedly.

"Father, from where did Mother come?" the child was curious to know.

"Your mother is dead and gone," her father cried in anguish.

"What do you mean by death, Father?"

"She has gone for ever."

"Mother has not gone anywhere. Just see; she is lying down here," said the child, pointing to her mother's body.

Someone, unwilling to frighten the child by revealing the truth, said, "Your mother is sleeping, my child".

"Why then is everybody weeping, Uncle? No one cries when Mother sleeps at night," asked the child innocently.

Grandfather Chidambara Raju, seeing the insatiable curiosity of the child and the predicament of the sorrowing father, took both of them to the terrace.

Anasuya would not keep quiet, but persisted with her questions.

"What do you mean by dying, Grandfather?" she asked. The old man did not know how to answer her.

"From where do persons who die come from?" was her next question.

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"From the mother's stomach," replied her grandfather.

"Are children always present in a mother's stomach?"

"No, my child."

"Then from where do they come?"

"God sends them."

"Alright, where do they go after death?"

"Back to God."

"Why?"

"It is His sweet will, my child."

"If God sends children and takes them back as He wishes, why should we weep over it?"

The child's question was a profound one indeed! Chidambara Raju was elated beyond words. In spite of the atmosphere of tragedy in the house, he hugged his granddaughter and kissed her forehead.

Seethapathy looked at his daughter in amazement.

"Father, at least you tell me why we should cry," Anasuya asked.

He could not contain his grief. "But Mother is dead," he said aloud and broke down.

"Who is the real mother, Father? Is it that which has left us really? Or is it this body? If this body is *Amma*, it will perish one day. If that which has really gone is *Amma*, then we have never seen it. In either case, there is no reason to be sad," argued the girl who was hardly four years old.

Ramana Maharishi of Thiruvannamalai rehearsed his death in his 16th year. He then came to the irrevocable conclusion that "what dies is this body. The soul force that activates us has no death. It has neither beginning nor end." At that very moment he became a realised soul — a *Jeevan Mukta*. He proclaimed to the world that "I am

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not this body or name. I am that indestructible, omniscient, primordial cause. To realise that 'self' within us is self-enquiry and self-realisation. To know one's true self is eternal liberation."

The four-year old Anasuya brought home the message of this Truth to those who sat in sorrow around her mother's dead body.

The body that bore the name Rangamma was no more. But 'AMMA', the original concept, did not and would not die. It has neither origin nor end. It is both the beginning and the end. The 'Amma' who declared this in her infancy lives in Jillellamudi as the embodiment and representative of the great Truth.

" 'That' alone is. It assumes different forms and names and projections in this world of objects. I am 'that' alone and nothing else. 'I' am not Anasuya Devi who is seated on this cot. I am the universal love called 'AMMA', which is the first principle and the root cause. All of you are the result of that universal love and, hence, my children." Amma is never tired of hammering home this truth to all those who come to her.

Everyone exists because of a divine force within. That force is everywhere and permeates everything. All other things we see apart from that is illusory.

Once we realise this Truth, all differences will vanish. Amma is a shining example of this Advaitic doctrine — of absolute monism.

"I am not the guru (master) nor are you my disciples. I am not the guide, nor you the wayfarers. I am Amma, you are my children." The kind Mother proclaims this and reveals her true self.

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If anyone chooses to ask her, "Amma, how and when did you attain this state?" she invariably replies, "I have always been in this state. I have not undergone any transformation. If you find a change in me, it is only because of your wrong estimate of me and your own mental angularities."

Some ask her, "Amma, which godhead do you worship?"

"The loving and lovable children who come to me are the gods I worship," quick comes the reply.

* * *

In her sixth year, Anasuya went to listen to a religious discourse by an eminent pundit. Observing the curious child who was listening with rapt attention, the pundit asked her, "Who are you, my child?"

Pat came the reply, "I have come here only to know who I am". The scholar stood nonplussed and speechless. Even at that age Amma had made her point very clear.

"Study of the Puranas and cramming of the Shastras alone will not help. One must aspire to know oneself." "Know thyself" is the cardinal philosophy she preaches. "Just as the running thread is hidden in a garland, so is the real 'I' invisible within you. If you remove the flowers one by one, the thread will be visible. If you surrender the ego, the real 'I' can be recognised easily. The Truth shall shine in its pristine glory."

Amma does not harangue those who come to seek her blessings nor give any *upadesa* — words of advice — or mantra to meditate upon or ponder over. She replies to the queries of her devotees in a simple way and drives home great philosophical truths through familiar similes.

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Her words of wisdom touch the hearts of her devotees, influence their thoughts and deeds, show them the right path and bless them with abiding peace.

Amma has no difficulty in understanding you, in whatever language you address her. When someone asked her about this faculty, Amma explained, "Sound is the basis of language. Thought is the basis of sound. Mind is the basis of thought. The soul force is the substratum of the mind. Because the same soul force binds you and me, I can easily know what you think and what you say. I am therefore of the opinion that the language of silence is more potent than all the other languages. If one heart understands another heart, there is no need for language!"

Amma's 'children' believe that there is nothing she is not aware of. She has a computer mind which remembers incidents that took place years ago, down to the minutest detail. She can recall without difficulty who said what, and when, how a person was standing or sitting, what the colour of his or her clothes was, etc. It is as if she is giving a running commentary when she recalls the past. Sitting in her room, she will narrate an incident that took place in a devotee's house the previous day, as if she had witnessed it herself. If anyone asks her, "How do you know, Amma?", she will laugh it away by saying, "I just guessed. It turned out to be correct."

It is widely believed that like great *Siddhas*, Amma cures her admirers of their ailments by taking those diseases on her self. Once, she had satisfied the hunger of another person by taking food herself. Anyone conversant with the journal *Matrusri* published by Matrusri Publications, Bapatla, will be acquainted with the myriad miracles she performs daily. But she never owns up to them.

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She is against keeping anyone under a spell by exhibiting supernatural powers.

Amma does not think that faith instilled in us by such demonstrations of supernatural powers or superhuman acts is conducive to healthy and sustained spiritual growth. To realise the inner spiritual force is the acme of wisdom. That supreme knowledge leads us to ultimate deliverance. That mental state is eternal happiness, which ensures a life of peace and plenty. Amma is interested only in kindling such enlightened ideas in the minds of her 'children'.

To stress the fact that Amma does not encourage anyone to materialise things through miracles to enchant the credulous, Gopalakrishnamurthi, a resident of *Andarillam,* recalled an incident.

A sadhu who came to receive Amma's *darshan* insisted that he would be the first to offer worship to her on that day. He stood before Amma, raised his hand and materialised a small piece of camphor from nowhere. The onlookers watched with great interest. Amma sat motionless, without any expression of wonderment on her face.

The sadhu asked Gopalakrishnamurthi, who was standing nearby, to light the camphor. But after a moment, it went out. Again he lighted it, and again it went out. By the time the worship was over, half a box of matchsticks had been emptied. The sadhu experienced great discomfiture. He realised at once the superiority of Amma and his own smallness.

He fell flat at Amma's feet and pleaded, "Forgive me for my arrogance. I misbehaved with you presuming myself to be superior to you."

Amma just laughed and commented, "Camphor is avail-

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able for ten paise in the market. Why do you spend the power acquired by you for this trivial purpose?"

Once, a sadhu told Ramakrishna Paramahamsa that he could walk on water. The saint smiled at him and asked him, "For a small coin, the boatman will take you across the river. Why should you waste your yogic powers on this simple thing?"

* * *

All the residents of *Andarillam* at Jillellamudi are dedicated to a life of service. No one addresses the other by name. Since they all consider themselves Amma's children, they address each other as 'brother' or 'sister'.

That family has a 'father' too. Nageswara Rao, the village Revenue Officer, is Amma's husband and is known as 'Appa'. The universal Mother also lives as a dutiful wife.

The moment Anasuya was born, the elders had decided that she should wed her cousin Nageswara. Accordingly, when she came of age, the marriage between the two was consummated. Though because of her spiritual eminence Amma became an object of worship, she remains the simple mother of her children and, by serving her husband as a dutiful wife, she finds peace and fulfilment.

A devotee, fully convinced of Amma's spiritual attainments, once wondered why she agreed to marry. Amma answered, "I welcomed the responsibility of family life just to show that matrimony need not stand in the way of one wanting to take to spiritual pursuits!" She strongly asserts that the true import of wedlock is the union of the individual self with the universal self.

Amma impresses people as an exemplary housewife when they learn that she performs *abhishekam* (sacred

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bath) daily to the golden lockets tied to the sacred thread of wedlock and drinks the sanctified water.

* * *

In the name of ultra-modernism, social progress and women's liberty, revolutionary transformations have taken place. The concept of the ideal Indian woman has been shattered beyond recognition. In such a confused context, the example of Amma stands unique as a lighthouse diffusing comfort and confidence. Let us hear what Amma has to say to our womenfolk.

"What does the sacred yellow thread worn around the neck by a married woman signify? The two golden pieces tied to it are the two feet of the husband. Whatever he is, and whatever he does, his feet are touching her heart. For a woman, is there an easier way of performing her duty to her husband than serving his two feet? But how many realise the sacredness of the *thirumangalyam*, the sacred cord of wedlock? Some try to open the lids of tin containers with the golden pieces attached to it. Some even use them as toothpicks. For a woman, her husband is the only God. By serving him, she gets spiritual emancipation. A wife should not grumble that she is serving to please her husband. On the contrary, she must realise that such service is for her own satisfaction and well-being. Such an attitude makes an ideal wife. For her, the home is the temple, her husband is the consecrated lord in the sanctum sanctorum. This opportunity of ennobling her life, by worshipping him sincerely and steadfastly, is afforded to our womenfolk only. An Indian woman is a far luckier person than a recluse who seeks emancipation of the soul by worshipping the unseen God."

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Poondi Swamiyar on the pyal *of the small house in Kalasapakkam where he stayed for over 15 years*

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Poondi Swamiyar

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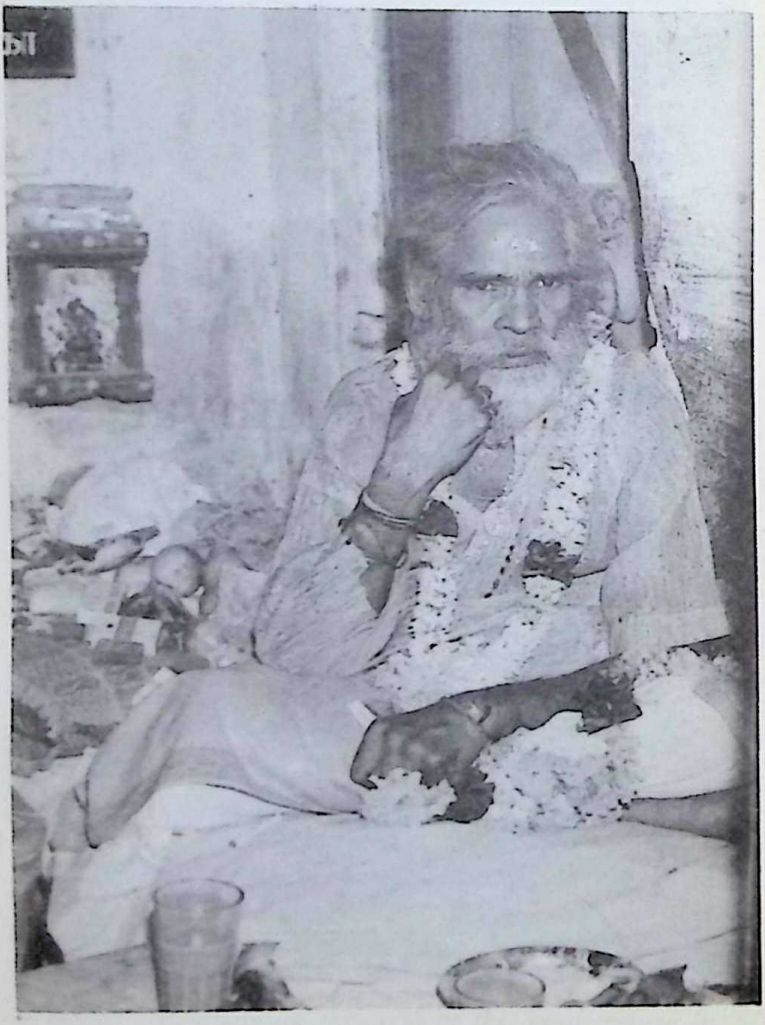

Poondi Swamiyar

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It was the fag end of 1969. On my way from Thiruvannamalai to Vellore, I stopped at Polur to have *darshan* at the *samadhi* of Saint Vitthoba. We met Duraiswami Swamigal at the *mutt* who introduced me to a Mr. R.Pargunam. The latter's father had been a contemporary and devotee of Vitthoba and had had a close association with the saint. Pargunam narrated certain incidents he had heard from his father about Vitthoba's life.

Before I took leave of him, I asked him if he had known any living *Siddha*.

"Oh, yes," he said enthusiastically, and added, "There is a *swamiyar* at Poondi. A recluse, he had wandered for several years around nearby villages. Seven years ago he settled on the *pyal* of a house there. He has not stirred from there since. Only last month, I was there. You must have his *darshan*."

"Where is Poondi?"

"About seven miles from Polur, on the main road to Thiruvannamalai. You will have to take a diversion to reach Poondi village," Pargunan explained.

We left immediately for Poondi accompanied by Duraiswami Swamigal.

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After proceeding about five miles on the Polur-Thiruvannamalai trunk road, we took a turn to the right at Kalasapakkam and travelled along the River Cheyyar.

"This area has been Poondi Swamiyar's haunt for a number of years. Whether it was blazing sun, or torrential rain, whether it was biting cold or thick mist, he used to spend his days and nights on the river bed only," said Swamiji.

"Does he belong to Kalasapakkam?"

"No one knows his name or place of birth. For over three decades, he was seen roaming about in the neighbouring villages. About seven years ago he came to Poondi and sat in a small house permanently."

"What is his age?"

"He looks a man of sixty. But those who have seen him 25 years ago say that they do not find any change in his appearance and that he does not seem to be aging at all. You cannot assess a *Siddha's* age from his appearance," stated Swamiji.

As we travelled, we enjoyed the natural beauty of the rural landscape. Because of good rainfall, there was a perceptible flow in the otherwise dry river. The leaves of a row of peepul trees on the bank rustled in the cool breeze, somewhat reducing the rigours of the blazing sun.

As we neared Poondi, I asked, "Is the house occupied by the Swamiyar in the interior of the village?"

"No, it is on the main bus route. See, there! Do you see that group of persons standing near a house? That is the house. We park the car here," said the Swamiji and driver Palani brought the car to a halt.

We got down from the car and walked up to the house.

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It was a small, tiled house. It had two *pyals* on either side. The one on the right was a square one, four feet by four feet, and the one on the left was rectangular, four feet long and two feet wide.

On the left *pyal* sat the Poondi Swamiyar. His head was poised at an odd angle. He glanced from time to time at those who stood around. He held a couple of boxes of matches in a tight grip in his right hand as he patiently combed his moderate beard with the fingers of his left hand. Every now and then he looked intently at his fingertips, as if searching for lice or dirt. Then he got back to combing his beard with serious intent.

A young man arrived, went to the Swamiyar and whispered in his ear. The Swamiyar nodded assent with a gruff 'hmm'. The young man picked up a cigarette, placed it between the Swamiyar's lips and lighted it. The Swamiyar asked for the box of matches. Now the Swamiyar had three boxes of matches in his right fist! He smoked with his left hand. I found him smoking in an unusual way. He inhaled, removed the cigarette, blew out the smoke, almost immediately took the cigarette back to his lips, inhaled, removed it and blew out smoke. He did this rapidly again and again, like a fast-motion shot in a movie, finishing a full cigarette within a couple of minutes! He let out only a little smoke, yet did not seem to swallow much of it.

Two admirers fell prostrate on the ground, stood up, touched his feet with veneration, and asked for sacred ash as *prasad*.

"You may take it," came the curt command. They took it from the cup, smeared it on their foreheads and left, merely saying, "We are going, *Saami*". "Let good befall

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on your endeavours," responded the Swamiyar, looking down, then looking up for a split second with sparkling eyes.

A boy came with a bottle of aerated water. He opened the bottle and offered it to the Swamiyar, who took it and drank it at a stretch, without once removing the bottle from his lips. As he handed over the bottle to the waiting boy, he let out a noisy and prolonged belch. The boy took a piece of cloth and wiped the Swamiyar's mouth and nostrils. The Swamiyar received these ministrations like a well-behaved child.

Before the boy left, the Swamiyar took a pinch of sacred ash, smeared it on the boy's forehead and bade him go.

I had been staring at the Swamiyar all this while. He suddenly looked at me. Nay, I felt a cool spark strike me. When I had read about the efficacy of Shirdi Sai Baba's 'yogic glance' I could not comprehend its full import. When I experienced the power-packed glance of Poondi Swamiyar, I could imagine the impact Sai Baba's yogic glances would have had on his devotees.

I, who had been watching the happenings without being impressed, fell at his feet the moment he glanced at me. It was an act performed unconsciously. It was a spontaneous response to a look that thrilled me beyond words.

A woman admirer put a peppermint in the Swamiyar's mouth, as if she was feeding her child. He stretched his hand and asked for the piece of paper in which the peppermint had been wrapped. An inexplicable impulse prompted me to offer something to the Swamiyar. I asked my friend to get a cup of coffee from a nearby 'tea shop'.

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A local enthusiast who had been busy offering me unsolicited information about the idiosyncrasies of the Swamiyar, told me that he would accept anything only if he had the mind and mood for it, and if he accepted what was offered, it meant the giver had his blessings in ample measure. Hence, it was with much hesitation and trepidation that I proffered the coffee to the Swamiyar.

He gave me a searching look and accepted the coffee. I observed his fingers. They were long and thickset. The hand was also large and sturdy. If he stood up he would be a stalwart figure.

He drank the coffee too in an unorthodox fashion. He neither raised his head nor removed the cup from his lips. He slurped the coffee fast with his tongue, as a cat would drink milk from a plate. I was immensely pleased that he had not only accepted my coffee but drunk it with relish. No sooner had he finished, another admirer brought him a cup of tea. He drank that too in the same manner. His ways were indeed strange.

Different fruits and eatables were littered all over the place. He was surrounded by oranges, apples, grapes, plantains, *laddu*, *halwa*, *boondhi*, chocolates, peppermints, biscuits and what not! On his lap lay a cigarette packet, two chocolate wrappers, a one rupee note. There were two glasses with left-over cold coffee. Pictures of various gods hung on the wall. There was a small but imposing *vel* of Muruga. A colour picture of Lord Muruga was nailed to a pillar opposite him. The Swamiyar concentrated on it at regular intervals. Behind the *pyal*, there was a small room. The various eatables offered to the Swamiyar were dumped in it up to the roof. Cigarette packets, boxes of matches, garlands, fruits, plantain leaves, bits of paper

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and a thousand and one things had been thrown in as directed by him. Nobody dared touch even a trivial thing found on the *pyal* without his permission.

I was startled to find the fruits that had been thrown in were fresh. They had not become rotten. No stink emanated from them. I could not see even a single fly or ant.

I was introduced to a man named Subramani, who was standing near a thatched shed opposite the house. He was a tailor. He had been attending on the Swamiyar for the past three or four years. Before that, when the Swamiyar was occupying the bigger *pyal* on the right, he did not allow anyone to even come near him.

Only during the last three years had he let others clean the *pyal* and bathe his body. Subramani brought food for the Swamiyar from his house, both in the morning and in the evening, but the Swamiyar had never asked him or anyone else to bring him anything to eat. He would eat only if he was spoonfed. If he did not feel like it, he would reject the food summarily. The Swamiyar sat through the whole day. Only at night would Subramani assist him to stretch out on the *pyal*. It was anyone's guess if he slept at all. At four in the morning, he would be assisted to sit up and resume his usual posture.

"Does he talk to people?" I asked Subramani.

"Oh, yes. He will talk freely, provided he is in the mood. Sometimes he gives direct answers to queries. Sometimes he replies with indirect and oblique remarks. We then have to try and understand the meaning with a little effort."

"Have you ever had occasion to ask his name or about his native place?"

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"Oh, yes. Several times, but in vain. He will not reveal them. He would silence me by saying, 'They are divine secrets'."

"Has any miracle taken place here to prove that he is really a *Siddha Purusha*?" I asked.

Subramani wanted to say something, but seemed to hesitate.

"Please be frank," I encouraged him.

"So many things happen every day... I am not clear in my mind if I should narrate them or not. You must be very cautious and careful. He is not an ordinary Swamiyar. You should gauge him according to your own personal experiences."

I took leave of the Swamiyar and left for Vellore.

* * *

A week later, I was back in Poondi and spoke to him. I said, "Swami, I was here last week. I could not resist the desire to see you again, so I came." I just spoke inconsequentially, merely because I felt an urge to say something. I least expected him to reply.

But most unexpectedly he spoke. "Even Nagarathnam Pillai says so. He says, 'If you think of me, I must be here'. Don't you know Arcot Nagarathnam Pillai? I mean Vellore-Arcot..."

I was reassured and emboldened.

"What is Swami's name? From where does the Swami hail?" I asked hurriedly.

"What harm did I do to rice-mill Govindaraja Mudaliar, or what did he do to me? Everything belongs to those good old days... good and bad... order and discipline... transport, justice, honour... what do you say? They laid

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the roads. Buses plied... electricity came... they planted the posts... Konerikuppam, Pilluru, Melvaidyanatha Kuppam... Friday *shandy*... will there not be a crowd? Those who come to buy and sell, and their children... everything must go on automatically... mustn't it? Do you concur with me? Annamangalam, Adimoolam... Ernamangalam Sivaraman... They put up a tollgate... took money and gave a receipt... But it is valid only for the night... Next day you must obtain a fresh receipt. Understand?" He went on in this strain. I could not make head or tail of his disjointed statements. To ascertain the probable period during which the incidents he referred to took place, I asked him, "Were the Englishmen in the country then?"

"The Japanese were also there," quick came the reply. I surmised he was referring to a time during World War II.

"May I know Swami's name and his birthplace?" I asked again, taking advantage of his conversational mood.

"I can't tell you all those things," he replied in a huff and I felt snubbed.

From the subjects he discussed and the idiom he used, it would appear that he had spent long years in rural areas. The core of his observations was agricultural problems and village development. But we could not divine the content or decipher the meaning of his utterances. Was he talking about the past, present or future? It was impossible to guess.

* * *

The Poondi Swamiyar does not reply to all questions. When he condescends to reply, some are direct answers, some are indirect references. He talks to persons at ran-

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dom. Most of the time he keeps a stoic silence. He looks at familiar and unfamiliar faces with equal indifference. It is extremely hard to observe any perceptible change in his expression.

Admirers and disciples from neighbouring villages trickle in throughout the day. Some fall at his feet, take the sacred ash and, smearing it on the forehead, speed away. If they take leave of him saying *"Poi varen, Saami"*, he sometimes replies *"Nallathu, poi va"* (very good, you may go), sometimes he simply nods assent, and at other times he remains as still as a rock, just staring at them.

Some take him into confidence and discuss their personal affairs. He gives them a patient and sympathetic hearing and sends them away with words of advice. He imparts knowledge through a colloquial language which will catch the imagination of rustic minds or by quoting a proverb which is used in day-to-day life. The deeper we ponder over them, the clearer the underlying import and significance become.

An old woman complains to the Swamiyar with deep hurt about her son who has become a spendthrift because of his evil ways. In the Swamiyar's comforting words to the unfortunate woman, his deep concern for her is obvious.

"What can we do about it, *Amma*? This is the Kali Age. If we spend twelve annas in a rupee, we must save four annas. We need not covet others' wealth or aspire to their property. We must be satisfied with a cup of gruel. Don't you agree with me, *Amma*? As is said in the proverb, 'The mother's heart is melting in love and the son's heart is hard as stone', you suffer agony. What to do? This is the Kali Age. Nobody will sympathise with

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another's suffering. If we step on a thorn, even the man next to us will not come to our rescue. Times are bad, what to do? You can lead a comfortable life only if you lead a careful life and save something for the winter... small drops make an ocean. *Arulilarkku avvulagam illai, Porulilarkku ivvulagam illai* (Those who do not have compassion are denied the joys of the other world. Those who do not have wealth are denied the pleasures of this world)."

The woman intervenes and mumbles something. The Swamiyar continues, "Yes, yes... it is not without significance they said 'You will hurt the same leg again and again, and the very same famished family is destined to suffer more and more'... Bad company. Who can help it, this is the Kali Age? You need not take much precaution if you raise greens in the garden. But if you plant a drumstick sapling nearby, you must put up a fence all round. Otherwise someone will steal the drumsticks when the tree starts yielding... This is such a hopeless age..."

Another devotee announces his plans to start a business, taking a friend as his partner. He seeks the Swamiyar's blessings for the project.

"Even in some families, brothers born to the same mother do not live in amity and peace these days... they quarrel among themelves... you be careful in your venture," advises the Swamiyar.

* * *

During another visit, I found the Swamiyar talking meanderingly. Suddenly he said, "Dharma has been given the go-by in the world and hence our unity has suffered grievously". It looked a truism at first, but when I contemplated more on that seemingly simple statement, I

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realised what a profound remark it was. I wondered how easily and effortlessly he had given expression to a mighty Truth.

On another occasion, I accosted him with the question, "Do you know Kamakoti Sankaracharya Swamigal?"

"Do you know Sankaracharya controls current, motor and pumpset?" he asked back.

I dismissed the answer at that time as being of no consequence. But as I ruminated over the question I could hazard a guess as to what the Swamiyar meant in his oblique language.

The fact that for over seventy years the Sage of Kanchi, the Head of the Kamakoti Mutt, has been mainly responsible for the spread of the cult of *bhakthi* and spiritual fervour, leading to a welcome moral regeneration among the people, cannot be disputed. With the spiritual power acquired through austerity and Karmic observances, the sage had supplied the moral current for the entire country. He had revived the long forgotten Vedic way of life, and brought out our dormant folklore and ancient arts by his soul force. By this he has enabled the dharmic flood to flow freely in Bharat, so that peace and plenty may be harvested in the world. I felt that the Poondi Swamiyar had given expression to this accepted fact in his own way and style. When, on another occasion, I referred to this remark of the Swamiyar to the Sage of Kanchi, he merely smiled.

* * *

When I reached Poondi on my next visit, it was nearly 9 p.m. The peaceful village was asleep. A couple of persons standing in front of the Swamiyar's *pyal* were con-

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versing in whispers.

We went near him. The fan was on and the fakir was stretched out. His eyelids were closed, but his toes were moving a little. Subramani switched off the light and drew the curtain.

"When will you wake him in the morning?" I asked.

"The question of waking him only arises if he sleeps! If you call him at any time during the night, he will open his eyes. He is lying down only because we do not want him to sit all the time. The day before yesterday, a group of people suddenly arrived from Coimbatore at midnight. We called out to him. He immediately sat up and talked to them. He also ate the fruits they gave. Do you want to talk to him? I shall ask him to sit up," said Subramani.

"No, please don't disturb him. I will be committing a sin if I make him sit up when he is stretching his tired limbs. We intend spending the night here. I shall meet him in the morning," I said.

At exactly four a.m. we were awakened by the voice of the tea-shop owner, who was pleading with someone to get up and fetch the milk.

We got up and saw a kitten running about near the Swamiyar's *pyal*. I had seen it there before. It would play about on the Swamiyar's lap, curl itself and sleep snugly in his lap, dance on his shoulders, sip the milk from the tiny aluminium cup near him. But the Swamiyar would not take notice of anything. I had not seen him touch the mischievous kitten even once, much less fondle it.

The kitten mewed once or twice. "Probably this is *Suprabhatham* for the Swamiyar," commented my friend Bobji. We heard the Swamiyar cracking his fingers. Soon afterwards, the boy from the tea-shop arrived with a cup

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of hot tea and called out *"Saami"*. The Swamiyar sat up immediately. After he finished drinking the tea, he coughed noisily.

Subramani went up to the Swamiyar, wiped his face with a piece of wet cloth, changed his shirt, smeared his forehad with *vibhuthi* (sacred ash), applied *chandan* and *kumkum*, garlanded him, removed the curtain and performed the usual pooja. Those who were standing around and the people who had arrived by the first bus offered their worship.

The Swamiyar had opened 'shop' for the day. The lucky ones would benefit by stopping there and getting blessed.

* * *

Everyone whom I contacted and made enquiries of said this *Siddha* had been roaming about in the surrounding rural areas for thirty years or more. I wanted to see the spots associated with the Swamiyar.

There is not a single temple in the area which he has not visited, no tree under which he has not sat, no boulder on which he has not slept. The villagers point out many landmarks, saying with enthusiasm "Swamiyar used to sit here", "He slept there", "He would have his food in this house", or "He would frequent that shop".

Twenty years ago they found him in the Mettupalayam stream to the left of the Cheyyar river, and housed him in a newly constructed hut. He would wander about throughout the day and retire to the hut in the evening. Sometimes he would sleep in a nearby cremation ground. He had been walking aimlessly with a bundle on his head and another in his hand when they found him. Someone who

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had been very kind to the Swamiyar, expecting him to do him a favour in return, was disappointed. Hurt by the insult, he belaboured the Swamiyar mercilessly as a result of which the Swamiyar left the place and went to Pulluru, a nearby village, where he stayed midst thorny bushes and cactus hedges. He then settled in a running brook. He would not move out of it even if there was a heavy downpour. The villagers, fearing that he might be washed away by the gushing waters, prepared a bamboo cage for him. But one day he was caught in a flood and almost drowned. The villagers rescued him, warmed his body by burning straw and kept him in Pachaiappa Nayanar's house.

This information was given to me by Ponnusami Nayanar, a former Chairman of the Panchayat Board. For him, Poondi Swamiyar was God himself. He was emotionally charged whenever he referred to the Swamiyar. With moist eyes, he narrated episode after episode which bound him to the Swamiyar for ever.

Once, due to a village feud, somebody robbed his sugarcane grinding machine. Complaints lodged with the Police were of no avail. Ponnusami Nayanar, for whom this was a grievous loss, went to the Swamiyar and stood before him, mentally calculating the chances of recovering the machine.

The Swamiyar suddenly said, "Your property is safe. You will find it in the river bank near Nasan grove. Go and search for it."

"The wonder of it was that that same day, someone saw a nail jutting out of the sand, and when we dug there, we found the machine intact. The Swamiyar had correctly pointed out the spot where the robbers had buried the stolen machine. From that day, he has been my God. At

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least once a day, I go to him for *darshan*. I do not talk to him. I pray mentally, and he answers my prayers and sets things right. Recently, there was a mild disturbance in my domestic life. There was a difference of opinion on a vital problem between myself and my son. I was naturally worried. The Swamiyar appeared in my son's dream and resolved the matter," narrated Ponnusami Nayanar.

Many persons I met and talked to recounted several such miracles. The Swamiyar seems to have registered a strong impression in everyone's mind by influencing their life through some inexplicable act or other.

Once, while walking along the riverside at night, a person was rendered speechless with horror when he saw the dismembered body of the Swamiyar, the limbs strewn in different directions. He fled from the gruesome scene and spent a sleepless night, but the next morning he found the Swamiyar hale and hearty, going about his business normally.

Everybody asserts that the Swamiyar has never begged for his food. Some have seen him eat mud and stones when hungry.

* * *

We went to see his haunts in Prayappattu, Mottur, Natchatrakoil, villages to the north of Poondi.

The villagers worship the Swamiyar as God. They love him as their child. They believe by personal experience that a mere look from him will relieve them of their troubles and that a pinch of sacred ash from him will cure incurable diseases.

"If he is not inclined to give us *prasadam*, it is impossible to get it from him whatever tactics we might adopt.

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Once, I saw a very affluent person trying to get *prasadam* from his hands by offering him various things, but the Swamiyar would not yield. He was insistent that the visitor must take the sacred ash from the cup himself. I have never seen him discriminate between the rich and the poor, or a familiar face and a stranger," a villager told us.

"A spotless saint with no requirements", "A wise and dispassionate sage", "One who is always immersed in his inner self, completely oblivious of his body", "A true *Siddha* who showers his blessings speaking the language of the eyes". These are some of the favourite descriptions given by his admirers, but the Swamiyar remains an enigma, who does not fit into any of these descriptions.

* * *

I spoke to a young sadhu who was standing still, absorbed in observing the Swamiyar. He had come from Badrinath in the Himalaya. His face was radiant with spiritual lustre. He spoke in English. He said he came to Thiruvannamalai for the Karthikai Deepam, the festival of light. He went to the top of Arunachala Hill from where he saw a bright light emanating from a northerly direction. He came down, walked towards it, and eventually landed in Poondi.

"I have come here three or four times since then. Wherever I go, the Swamiyar appears before me and brings me here. I have not seen the like of him anywhere, at any time. It is impossible to fix his position in the spiritual hierarchy. He is so evolved that he seems to have crossed all planes of consciousness and reached the pinnacle of transcendental existence," summed up the young sadhu.

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On my return journey to Madras, I stopped at Ratnagiri, at a Murugan shrine on a hillock six miles from Vellore. During the course of my talk with the young Swamiji known as Balamurugan Adimai (the Slave of Lord Balamuruga), I mentioned my impressions of what I had seen and heard at Poondi. This young Swamiji had been a family man, an employee of the Electricity Board, who had undergone a sudden spiritual transformation one morning while on his way to work. He became a sadhu, but lost his power of speech. He stays at the temple, attracting thousands of devotees who contribute liberally towards improving and enlarging the shrine. Commenting on Poondi Swamiyar, he wrote "The fruit that is beyond our reach. Not easily comprehensible. TOP", then closed his eyes and raised his hand skyward.

* * *

It was the middle of 1971. I was in Poondi again after a lapse of about six months. When I approached the Swamiyar, he was engaged in his 'yogic practice' (as the local gentry would have it), shutting his eyes, raising his eyebrows in jerky motions, clenching his teeth tightly, shaking his head at an odd angle. I had observed him before, engaged in such continuous and contorted facial gesticulations. In such moments, devotees normally refrained from talking to him. He is said to be in 'yoga'. No one was sure when it would cease. It might last half an hour, two hours or, sometimes, even four hours at a stretch.

I sat in the thatched shed opposite, observing the Swamiyar intently. A village schoolmaster came to me and said, "I feel sorry that you cannot converse with the Swamiyar at present. As you have come after a long break,

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you must have much to discuss with him. He has been in 'yoga' for the past two days. He has not exchanged even a word with anybody."

Assuring the well-meaning teacher that I had not come to talk to the Swamiyar but only for *darshan*, I waited for twenty more minutes.

I approached the Swamiyar with the intention of taking leave of him. Just then, I was goaded by a sudden inner urge to reveal the dream I had had the previous night.

I said, "Last night, the Kanchi Sankaracharya appeared in my dream and suggested that I write something more about you".

The moment he heard me utter the name 'Sankaracharya', the Swamiyar stopped his 'yoga' abruptly and listened to what I had to say.

"I have already written what little details I could gather about you. If you are pleased to provide me with more information, I will be only too happy to record it," I ventured hesitantly.

"Yes, go on... write...," said the Swamiyar enthusiastically.

"I can write only if I get more facts. I am told your good self had stayed in nearby villages like Kanchi and Kadaladi. Will I be able to gather some information if I go to those places?" I asked.

"Well and good... you may go there... there is a *mutt* for Sankaracharya in Kanchi..."

I was intrigued because I thought that the Swamiyar was confusing the village Kanchi ten miles away with the town Kanchipuram more than sixty miles away. The Sankaracharya's chief *mutt* is situated in Kanchipuram.

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"Do you mean the Big Kanchipuram?" I asked.

"No, I am referring to Kanchi. The *mutt* there is a brick and mortar building... the work of a *maistry* (master mason)."

"Is there a temple?"

"Yes, yes... go and see it for yourself. There are three *lingas*. Ask Narayanaswami Chettiar... he will tell you everything."

"Which Narayanaswami Chettiar?"

"Temple trustee Narayanaswami Chettiar."

I headed for the village of Kanchi. We went past Kadaladi and reached Kanchi. It was a tiny little village. It didn't look like a place where you would find a monastery. But because the Swamiyar had told me so, I confidently asked a person stretched out on the verandah of an unassuming building whether there was a Sankaracharya *mutt* in Kanchi.

"There is no such *mutt* here, but we have a 'Sankara Nilayam'," answered the person, sitting up.

"Where is it?"

"This is the building. I am the caretaker. When Kanchi Sankaracharya was here last, he expressed a wish that we must acquire a building for a school to teach the Vedas. Hence we bought this by raising public donations. Why don't you step in and have a look?" he said and conducted us in. I followed him, unable to suppress my surprise at unwittingly coming to the right building first stop. There was a large portrait of the Sankaracharya in the main hall. I paid my obeisance.

I realised that the Poondi Swamiyar must have referred to this building as the *mutt*. It was just an ordinary brick and mortar masonry structure. The Swamiyar must

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have described this as '*maistry* work' in his own inimitable language!

I went to the Siva temple whose deity is known as Kara Kandeswarar. There I learnt of six other Kara Kandeswarar Temples along the banks of the Cheyyar river, in Kadaladi, Mambakkam, Madhimangalam, Yelathur, Poondi and Kuruvimalai. They are together known as 'Saptha Karaikandam'. These *Sivalingas* were established and worshipped by Lord Subramania, in atonement for the sin he once committed of cutting off the heads of seven holy Brahmins.

Narayanaswami Chettiar mentioned by the Swamiyar was no more the trustee and he was not in the village just then. Instead, I was asked to contact one Venkatarama Chettiar, popularly known as 'Kullappa'. But as he was sick, I could not talk much with him. I could not gather any worthwhile information about the Swamiyar's story in Kanchi other than the vague recollections of some old villagers.

* * *

As we were proceeding from Kadaladi to Madhimangalam, I saw an imposing hill. On enquiry, I learnt that it was called the Parvatha Hills and that there was an Eswara shrine on the top. An old man pointed out the white speck of a dome.

"Are there steps to climb to the top?" I asked.

"No, you will have to go up by a rough and irregular track. It will take four to five hours to reach the top. It is difficult and troublesome," said the old man.

"Is regular worship performed for the deity?" I asked.

"The priest goes up only twice a year. But they say

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Siddhas come there every night to offer worship. If you stay overnight here, you will hear the sound of the bells, smell the fragrance of burning incense. In the morning you will find flowers on the *Sivalinga*."

I had heard about the Parvatha Hills some time ago as one of the haunts of the Poondi Swamiyar. Since then, it had attracted me and when I heard about its mystic association from this local, I decided to climb the hill with my friends.

A month and a half later, we arrived in Poondi to seek the blessings of the Swamiyar for our mountaineering venture! I was anxious to have his advice, along with his blessings, for the expedition, as the locals had painted a frightening picture of the difficulties to be faced during the ascent.

I went to the Swamiyar and said in an undertone, "We intend climbing the Parvatha Hills. Have we your permission to go?"

"Oh, yes. You may go there," he promptly replied.

"What are we expected to see there?" I asked.

"The Pachaiamma shrine. Sivaratri is important there. Annabhishekam. Rathasapthami. I was there on that day," recalled the Swamiyar.

I had previously been informed only of a Siva shrine on top, but Swamiyar spoke of a goddess' shrine. Though confused a little, I did not seek clarification from him.

"Swami, I am given to understand that it is a rather difficult and arduous journey. We need your blessings for a safe expedition," I requested.

"You may proceed... big rails... small rails... crowbar... all jumper work." The Swamiyar spoke in monosyllables as usual.

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I could not make out anything of what he said, but I kept discreetly mum.

"Our intention is to go to Kadaladi and seek the help of the village headman, Nageswara Iyer."

"It is already late," mumbled the Swamiyar.

We received the sacred ash from the Swamiyar and were on our way. When we reached Kadaladi, about eight miles from Poondi, it was nearly four in the evening. We met Nageswara Iyer, who was happy to help us with our plans. I was anxious to start, without wasting any time, and suggested we begin the climb with the aid of a petromax lamp. But Iyer discouraged us. He said our safety was his responsibility. He knew when and how to send us.

"You have dinner at my house, and rest for the night. Get up at five in the morning, and have a bath before you leave for the foot of the hills. I will make all the necessary arrangements," Iyer said. He was one of those whose bearing and manner of speech demand immediate and absolute obedience. We put ourselves in his hands.

The journey up the hill the next morning was hazardous and wearisome. But for the help of local guides and the company of my friends, I would have surely retraced my steps half way. They coaxed me not to give up the attempt. Physically I was exhausted, but some indomitable will spurred me on.

The last lap was the worst. It was very steep and slippery. A huge rock was studded with iron bars. I had to almost crawl up at a snail's pace, holding the bars one by one as I inched my way up. One slip would have cost me my life.

"The Poondi Swamiyar must have referred to these iron bars as crowbars," I thought.

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"Fixing these bars in the rock is known as jumper work; the Swamiyar must have meant this," explained Bobji.

By God's grace we successfully negotiated the steep ascent, but then, lo, ahead of us were a couple of girders bridging a yawning gap between two rocks. We would have to cross that.

The Swamiyar had evidently referred to this bridge as the 'big rails'.

"There you see the small rails," pointed out Sundaresan, our photographer. The Poondi Swamiyar had been absolutely correct. We had to climb a small iron ladder to reach the top.

A fortnight later, we went to Poondi and recounted our experiences to the Swamiyar. He listened without any comment. When I showed him the photographs, he looked at them with interest but showed no expression in his face.

Sensing that the Swamiyar was in a receptive and communicative mood, I returned to my usual questions which he had been parrying all these months.

"From where has Swami come to Poondi?"

"I came to Kadaladi from Modern Theatres. In those days, we had the Karthikeyan Bus Service plying in these parts... I was taken in one of the buses. I spoke something. They could not understand. They just blinked," the Swamiyar went on.

"In what language did Swami speak to them?"

I thought I was being clever, putting that question. I thought I could discover to which region of the country he belonged.

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"I spoke a language they could not understand," replied the Swamiyar, eluding the net I had spread for him!

The Poondi Swamiyar had been using the name 'Modern Theatres' quite often in his conversation. To verify whether it was the Modern Theatres situated in Salem, I asked him, "Do you mean the film studio?"

"Yes," he replied.

"If I go there, can I get some information about you?"

"Yes, you can."

"Is there anybody known to you still alive?"

"None."

"Shall I go there and make enquiries?"

"Oh, yes, you may try."

"Why did you come to Kadaladi from Modern Theatres?"

"I was just walking towards Singarawadi."

"Where is Singarawadi?"

"Near Kadaladi. Wherever I went, I went without seeking anything in particular. I would return without any regret or remorse. That particular day, I was dejected that I had been born without a place or name. When I came near the Police Station, I felt tired and stretched out. Just then a *sayabu* came near me and asked, 'Swami, what brought you here?'."

"Which *sayabu*?" I asked in great eagerness.

"Don't you know Khadar Batcha. He is a fine gentleman. He is a skilled conversationalist and he is too clever for anybody... So I kept silent all the time, without answering any of his questions."

" 'Swami, the Vinayaka temple is being neglected without pooja or *abhishekam*. Why don't you arrange for some one to look after the temple?' Khadar Batcha requested

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me. But I never spoke to him. It is very difficult to vanquish him in talk. I simply dozed off. I got up the next morning and resumed my walk. Four or five persons were going towards the paddy field with pickaxes. Probably they were busy with the *ragi* crop. Just then I saw about ten persons standing at the bus stop, obviously waiting for the bus. I guessed that they were pilgrims bound for Thirupathi. I was resting under the tamarind tree. Khadar Batcha came there... and taking out his penknife, peeled a mango and offered it to me saying, 'Eat it, Swami'. No one can hope to beat him in conversation, so I received it from him and ate it."

He went on in this strain without a break. He spoke as if he was witnessing everything he recounted. While he talked, the past, the present and the future appeared to lose their meaning, and time and space seemed to attain new dimensions.

While we listened to him, we entertained no doubts regarding the veracity of his narration or any of its details.

Intrigued by his statement that he felt sorry that he had been born without a place or name, I asked him, "Is such a birth possible?"

He coolly shot back, "Why not?".

The pooja over, the Swamiyar was put to bed. I was standing near his head. The Chairman of the Swamiyar Committee suggested that I could ask some questions.

I asked the Swamiyar to say something about the Parvatha Hills and he replied, "There were streets. I saw some hotels and shops. I went upstairs and knocked at the door. A dozen persons were seated inside, I thought the

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time and the atmosphere were not conducive, so I came down."

I could make nothing of his abstruse and obscure utterances. But I was vaguely conscious that they had a deeper significance and relevance.

The Swamiyar refused to be drawn out any further on the subject.

Like the seven Karaikanda shrines, on the northern bank of the Cheyyar, there are seven Siva shrines known as 'Saptha Kailasam'. I expressed my wish to visit these shrines and sought the Swamiyar's blessings.

He blessed me and asked me to go to Vasudevampattu, Thamarapakkam, Narthampoondi, Thenpallipattu, Pazhankoil, Karappoondi and Mandakalathur.

I asked him, "Have you seen those temples?"

"I never go in. I just see them from outside as I walk along," he replied.

It was past nine when I left the Swamiyar and adjourned to the thatched hut opposite, for my night's rest.

It was nearly four in the morning when I awoke. I got up from my bed, walked up to the *pyal* occupied by the Swamiyar, and stood by it silently. The little kitten which was curled near the Swamiyar's feet, suddenly stood up, raised its back, bending it like a bow, shook its body and mildly scratched the Swamiyar's right foot. He opened his eyes slightly, reacting to the sensation, and was helped to sit up. The alarm clock shrieked. It was four to the second.

The tea vendor from the neighbouring shop brought a cup of tea. The Swamiyar received it and drank it in his own queer style. Subramani brought him water in a bucket, and gave the Swamiyar's face, hands and legs a quick

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wash, changed his shirt, applied sacred ash on his forehead, garlanded him, lit camphor and swirled it before him.

A woman accompanied by her son approached the Swamiyar. "*Saami*, I took a vow to offer you money, kindly accept it," she said and handed over 25 rupees in currency notes. He received the money and kept it in his hand.

"*Saami*, the boy has failed the pre-university course. Am I to send him for some job or start a small business for him?" the anxious mother asked.

"Wait for 15 days. You need not decide in a hurry... take it easy," he said with touching affection and concern.

"*Saami*, we take our leave of you."

"Yes, you may go."

After receiving the *prasadam*, they departed.

A person was waiting with three children. He had come the previous night. He had fallen out with his father. In anger, he had left his home with his family. He had left his wife with her parents and started in search of a livelihood, taking his three children along with him. For a couple of days he had wandered aimlessly and, unable to find mental peace, had come for the Swamiyar's *darshan*.

He came near the Swamiyar and whispered his plight into his ears.

"What am I expected to do now, tell me, *Saami*?" he asked in innocent candour.

"You go back to your father. How can you work anywhere with three little children. Who will look after them? If the father is unreasonable and querulous, the son should submit and compromise in the interest of domestic peace.

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Take your wife and return home. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, *Saami*, I will do as you bid," said the person and, receiving the *prasadam*, took leave of the Swamiyar.

Later that morning, after a bath in the holy Cheyyar, we left for Kadaladi, and went round the Parvatha Hills, a distance of nearly 16 miles. The next day, we visited the Saptha Kailasam temples in the company of Nageswara Iyer.

Back in Madras, Poondi Swamiyar still haunted my thoughts. I had been made aware of the Saptha Karaikandam and Saptha Kailasam shrines and the Parvatha Hills only because of this mystic. His utterances, with their psychic flavour, and his simple and rustic homilies had captured my imagination and had inexplicably drawn me to him again and again. But however much I tried, I could not elicit any information about his birth or early days. I gave up the attempt as a futile exercise. His parentage and place of birth and early life still remain a mystery. In retrospect, I am convinced that this adds to the awe of his enigmatic personality.

* * *

Among those who wrote to me about their experiences in the Parvatha Hills was A. Viswanatha Pillai, a Highways Inspector. He belonged to Arunagirimangalam, adjacent to Madhimangalam. He wrote to me to say that I should have chosen the Madhimangalam approach rather than the Kadaladi route to climb the Parvatha Hills. His family had been going to the top on Sivarathri regularly for the past thirty years. Some time later, he met me and invited me to go with him to the Hills on Annabhishekam day.

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Our conversation turned to the *Siddha Purushas* who could disappear from view at will and reappear the next moment in any form they choose. Pillai recalled meeting a *Siddha* in the Parvatha Hills.

About 25 years ago, Pillai had climbed the hill on Sivarathri with his parents and brothers. Among those who are fed on that day was a person who looked like a local woodcutter. He stayed with them overnight, and accompanied them on their return journey the next morning.

As they were coming down the Hills, they wondered whether the stranger might be a *Siddha* and whispered their doubts among themselves. The stranger, who intuitively sensed the subject of their conversation, decided to clear their doubts. He stood before a thorny bush and declared, "Some people here do not believe in my powers. Let them know who I am." The next moment, the bush split in two. The stranger stepped in between the two halves and the bush closed again, completely covering him.

Everyone was convinced that he was a *Siddha*. After a minute, he came out of the bush, laughing heartily.

Later he walked with them, engaging everyone in light conversation. They arrived at the Pachaiamman shrine (mentioned to me by the Swamiyar) in the foothills, offered worship and had a sumptuous lunch. The *Siddha* ate well, sitting next to Pillai. Later, they resumed their journey.

Three or four persons were in front, the *Siddha* was in the middle and Pillai and his relatives were at the rear as they walked. When they came to a stream, the *Siddha* stepped into the stream to quench his thirst. Suddenly, he

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disappeared and all attempts to find him proved futile. They returned home with a heavy heart.

Pillai told me that when he had invited the stranger to join them for dinner the previous night on the hill top, he had at first excused himself. He had said, "We are twelve in all. Only I have come out. Some other day, all twelve will come and dine with you." But Pillai had finally persuaded him to dine with them that night.

After hearing Pillai narrate his experiences, I remembered what the Poondi Swamiyar had told me once. He had said that "when I went up and knocked at the door, I saw twelve persons sitting inside and I had to return as the time and atmosphere were not conducive then".

I still wonder whether the twelve persons mentioned by the *Siddha* are the same as those referred to by Poondi Swamiyar.

The doubt persists in enveloping darkness. I am waiting patiently for the light of dawn.

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Update

The Saint of Mantralaya

The nearest railway station to reach 'Mantralaya' is Mantralayam Road, situated between Adoni and Raichur in Karnataka on the South Central Railway. You can go to 'Mantralaya' from Adoni also, but it is a greater distance. Buses and other road transport are available. Trains from Chennai to Mumbai stop at Mantralayam Road station. Chennai to Adoni is 498 km and to Raichur 567 km.

'Mantralaya' has been growing and the number of guest-houses has increased. Other facilities for the ever-increasing flow of pilgrims are also available. The Manager of the Brindavan office may be contacted for further details.

Baba of Shirdi

The railway station nearest to Shirdi (Maharashtra) is Kopergaon situated on the Central Railway's Daund (Dhond)-Manmad line. Dhond is on the Chennai-Mumbai line, 1012 km from Chennai. You can reach Kopergaon from Pune also. Shirdi is reached by bus or taxi from Kopergaon. Passengers from South India and from Mumbai

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must alight at Dhond and change trains to reach Kopergaon.

From a humble village decades ago, Shirdi had grown into a mini-temple-town, with numerous lodges and restaurants available for the pilgrims. The Sai Sansthan office may be approached for participation in the daily worship and other activities at the *samadhi* shrine.

Kamakoti Seshadri Swamigal

Buses are available from Chennai and other major towns to Thiruvannamalai. You can also reach the town by train from Villupuram, situated 110 km from Chennai. There are four trains a day; the Villupuram-Thirupathi passenger; Villupuram-Katpadi passenger; Pondicherry-Thiruvannamalai passenger; and Madurai-Thirupathi Express.

The Sri Seshadri Swamigal *adhishtanam — samadhi* shrine — is situated adjacent to the Ramanashramam, on Chengam Road. Guesthouses and rooms are available for the devotees. You can peacefully meditate on the beautiful view of Arunachala Hill from the Ashram complex.

The small tiled house (6 South Mada Street, Little Kanchipuram - 631 503), where Sri Seshadri resided before he left for Thiruvannamalai, has been acquired by the Sri Kamakoti Seshadri Swamigal Trust and converted into a *dhyana*-cum-prayer *mantap*, where a large colour portrait of the Swami is kept. The birthday [(*Hasta* star in the Tamil month of *Thai* (Jan.-Feb.)] and Remembrance Day during the month of *Margazhi* (Dec.-Jan.) are observed annually.

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Mummidivaram Bala Yogi

Those who want to go to Bala Yogi Ashram, at Mummidivaram, must board the train for Calcutta in Chennai and alight at Rajamundry from where they can reach Mummidivaram by bus or taxi. The distance is about 80 km, *via* Amalapuram. Mummidivaram is about 13 km from Amalapuram.

The visitor can have the *darshan* of the *samadhis* of both the Senior and Junior Bala Yogis. The former passed away in July 1985, in his 55th year, and the latter in October 1991, in his 50th year.

Throughout the year various festivals and ceremonies are observed in the Ashram. Apart from Sri Rama Navami, Sri Krishna Jayanthi, Sivarathri, and Guru Poornima, the birthdays and *samadhi* days of the two Bala Yogis are conducted with great fervour and enthusiasm by the Ashram committee and the local people.

Amma of Jillellamudi

Jillellamudi is 14 km from Bapatla in Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh. Bapatla railway station is on the Chennai-Vijayawada main line. Near the station is 'Matrusri Sadanam', a guesthouse where you can get information on how to proceed to Jillellamudi. Transport facilities are available from Matrusri Sadanam to Jillellamudi Ashram. At the Ashram, the reception office will arrange for accommodation. For further details, contact The Secretary, Sri Viswa Janani Parishad, Jillellamudi-522 113, A.P., South India.

The entire complex is called 'House of All', and

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'Annapoornalayam' is its round-the-clock kitchen where food is served free to everyone without distinction.

'Anasuyeswaralayam' is the *samadhi* shrine of 'Amma' where worship is offered daily with Veda chanting and *bhajans*. Amma passed away on June 12, 1985. Her husband predeceased her.

'Vatsalyalayam' is the place where 'Amma' lived, blessing and offering solace to those who came for *darshan*. Adjacent to it is the Meditation Hall.

Matrusri Orient College, High School and medical centres are run by the Ashram.

Poondi Swamiyar

Kalasapakkam is situated between Porur and Thiruvannamalai on the bus route in the North Arcot District. You take a turn to reach Poondi village. The small house with the *pyal* which the Swamiyar occupied for over 15 years is still intact, having been purchased and donated to the organisers by a devotee. The *samadhi* shrine has been erected very near the house. A metal statue of the Swamiyar has been raised.

The Full Moon festival during the Tamil month of *Chitrai* (April-May) is celebrated with fervour and devotion. On Guru Pooja — the day of the passing away of the Swamiyar (3-11-1978) — special worship and cultural programmes are conducted every year.

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SIX MYSTICS OF INDIA

In this book are the stories of six extraordinary persons — Raghavendra Swami of Mantralaya, Saibaba of Shirdi, Seshadri Swami of Thiruvannamalai, Bala Yogi of Mummidivaram, Jillellamudi Amma and Poondi Swamiyar. The first was a yogi who attained *Jeeva Samadhi*, the second a rare mystic, the third a *Brahma Jnani*, the fourth was immersed in life-long *tapasya*, the fifth embodied universal love as *tapas* and the sixth was an enigmatic *Siddha*.

Bharanidharan narrates their life stories, describes their ashrams, and talks of the miracles they performed, providing a wealth of hitherto unknown detail. What he tells is extraordinarily absorbing and profoundly moving, as he brings out the great compassion of these mystics.

Yet these are no conventional biographies. Bharanidharan goes to the very roots of these mystics, in a physical sense — travelling to the places where they were born, lived and attained self-realisation, visiting the spots associated with them, and meeting and talking to people who knew them. He searches for the sources of their respective uniqueness and details graphically the environment, the circumstances, and the manner in which they became transformed into persons revered by tens of thousands. Drawing attention to every detail connected with their lives and often pinpointing the moment of their transformation, he maps out vividly the road each took on his or her spiritual journey.

Six Mystics of India is a travelogue of the spirit. It is also a travelogue which takes you on a vicarious pilgrimage to the places sanctified by these six mystics; in a sense, to the holy India which remains still hidden to most of us.

Don't be surprised if, after reading the book, you set out on this pilgrimage yourself. When you do, Bharanidharan's book will be a useful guide and companion.

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